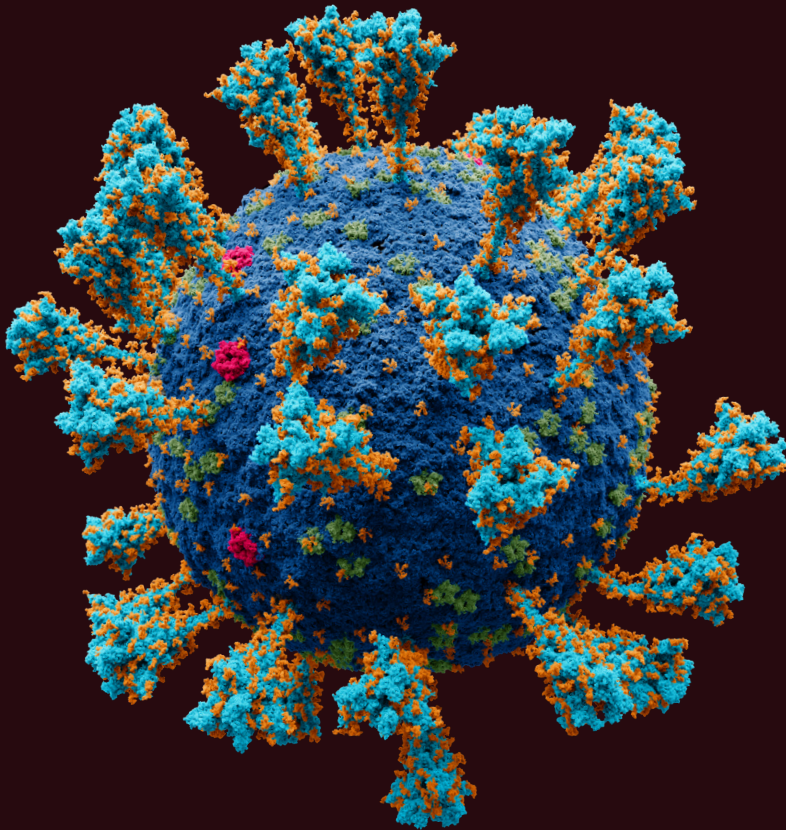


Communicating a Pandemic

Crisis Management and Covid-19
in the Nordic Countries



NORDICOM

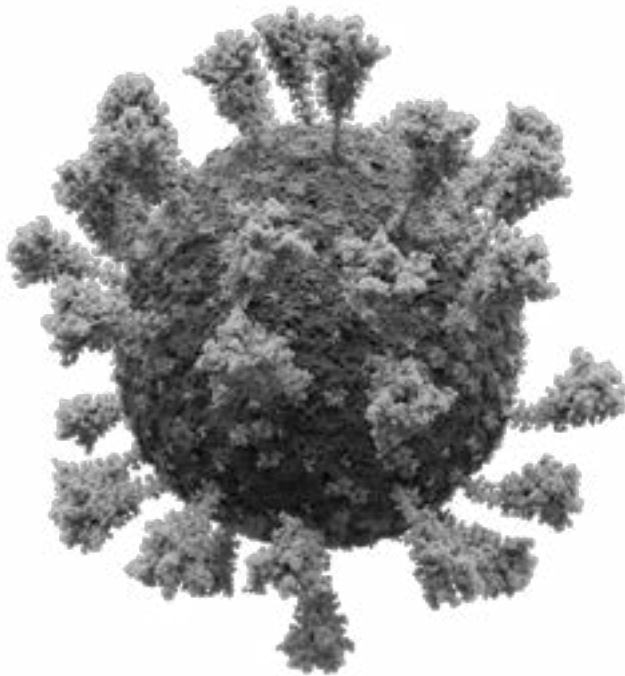
EDITED BY:

BENGT JOHANSSON, ØYVIND IHLEN,
JENNY LINDHOLM, & MARK BLACH-ØRSTEN

**COMMUNICATING A PANDEMIC:
CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND COVID-19
IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES**

Communicating a Pandemic

Crisis Management and Covid-19
in the Nordic Countries



NORDICOM

EDITED BY:

**BENGT JOHANSSON, ØYVIND IHLEN,
JENNY LINDHOLM, & MARK BLACH-ØRSTEN**

Communicating a Pandemic:
Crisis Management and Covid-19 in the Nordic Countries
Bengt Johansson, Øyvind Ihlen, Jenny Lindholm, & Mark Blach-Ørsten (Eds.)

© 2023 Respective authors. This is an Open Access work licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of the licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

ISBN (print): 978-91-88855-67-1

ISBN (PDF): 978-91-88855-68-8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688>

The publication is also available Open Access at www.nordicom.gu.se

Published by:
Nordicom, University of Gothenburg
Box 713
SE 405 30 Göteborg
Sweden

Cover and figures by: Karin Andén

Cover illustration by: Alexey Solodovnikov & Valeria Arkhipova (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Graphic design by: Henny Östlund

Contents

Preface	7
---------	---

Section I

1. <i>Bengt Johansson, Øyvind Ihlen, Jenny Lindholm, & Mark Blach-Ørsten</i> Introduction: Communicating a pandemic in the Nordic countries	11
2. <i>Siv Sandberg</i> The role of administrative tradition in government responses to crises: A comparative overview of five Nordic countries	31

Section II

3. <i>Lars Nord & Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell</i> Communicating the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparison of government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden	53
4. <i>Joel Rasmussen, Øyvind Ihlen, & Jens E. Kjeldsen</i> Strategic Covid-19 management in communicational practice: At the crossroads to remain open or not in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden	73
5. <i>Jens E. Kjeldsen</i> Crafting a crisis: How the genre of the justifying press conference constituted the Covid-19 pandemic as an emergency and legitimised the power of authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden	97
6. <i>Pernille Almlund, Jens E. Kjeldsen, & Ragnhild Mølster</i> Expressions of governance, risk, and responsibility: Public campaigns in the crisis and risk management of Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden	121
7. <i>Jenny Lindholm, Tom Carlson, Frederike Albrecht, & Helena Hermansson</i> Communicating Covid-19 on social media: Analysing the use of Twitter and Instagram by Nordic health authorities and prime ministers	149
8. <i>Finn Frandsen & Winni Johansen</i> Corporate crisis management: Managing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden	173
9. <i>Wiebke Marie Junk</i> Lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic: An analysis of communication frequency between interest organisations and political gatekeepers in Denmark and Sweden	195

Section III

10. *Marina Ghersetti, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, & Sigrún Ólafsdóttir*
Watchdogs and government megaphones: The dual democratic roles of the news media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Iceland and Sweden 217
11. *Jannicke Fiskvik, Andrea Vik Bjarkø, & Tor Olav Grøtan*
Vaccine rhetoric, social media, and dissensus: An analysis of civic discourse between Norwegian health authorities and citizens on Facebook and Twitter during crisis 241
12. *Mark Blach-Ørsten, Anna Maria Jönsson, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir, & Birgir Guðmundsson*
The role of journalism in a time of national crisis: Examining criticism and consensus in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic 261

Section IV

13. *Bengt Johansson, Jacob Sohlberg, & Peter Esaiasson*
Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies: Rallies around the Nordic flags during the Covid-19 pandemic 285
14. *Brita Ytre-Arne & Hallvard Moe*
Citizens' news use during Covid-19: Concerns about misinformation and reliance on local news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden 303
15. *Klas Backholm & Camilla Nordberg*
Efficient authority communication in times of crisis: Examining how vulnerable language minorities experienced Covid-19 communication strategies in Finland, Norway, and Sweden 325

Section V

16. *Mark Blach-Ørsten, Øyvind Ihlen, Bengt Johansson, & Jenny Lindholm*
Conclusions: In search of a Nordic model of crisis communication 349

Preface

In late 2020, between the first and the second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, Johannes Bjerling, scientific editor at Nordicom, reached out to us with a brilliant idea. He asked if we wanted to edit a book about Covid-19, more specifically, about how the pandemic was communicated in the Nordic countries. We all agreed this was a good idea, not least since some of us already had research projects running on this very topic or were planning for studies on the subject. The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – have received rather strong scholarly interest, not least because the Nordic model has been seen as a role model for governance and used for comparisons of governance, political communication, and other fields. So why not a comparative book on crisis communication? We all believed the management of Covid-19 would be suitable for comparisons of crisis communication and would contribute to a scientific field, which to a large extent has focused on single case studies of countries or organisations. What we did not know at the time was that the pandemic would return in one wave after another, and even if Covid-19 is no longer currently seen as a danger to society in the Nordic countries, citizens are still dying from the disease. And in a country like China, lockdowns are a part of everyday life as we write this preface.

In this volume, we have gathered a large number of communication scholars and political scientists from the Nordics, who, in their respective chapters, focus on different aspects of crisis communication related to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the moment, public attention tends to focus on the war in Ukraine, the protests in Iran, and other international events instead of Covid-19. However, even if the pandemic is not currently in the limelight, we believe the comparative analyses in this book will contribute to a deeper understanding of crisis communication and pandemics, but also on how crises are communicated more generally. This knowledge is important, as we live in a world where crises has become the “new normal” as we tend to move from one crisis to another. We can also be sure that Covid-19 is not the last pandemic; there will be future pandemics and our knowledge about crisis communication will be essential to our understanding of how they can be mitigated.

We are grateful to Johannes for bringing us together and for his hands-on approach as a scientific editor. The stellar work done by the Nordicom staff, including Josefine Bové, Karin Hjorthen Zelano, Sara Rebecka Stenkvis, Julia Romell, Karin Andén, and Kristin Clay, also needs to be acknowledged.

Lastly, we want to say a big thank you to all the contributors for trusting us with their work, as well as give a shout out to the anonymous reviewers for their phenomenal input that helped improve the book immensely.

Bengt Johansson, Øyvind Ihlen, Jenny Lindholm, & Mark Blach-Ørsten
Gothenburg, Oslo, Vasa, & Roskilde
December 2022

Section I

Introduction

Communicating a pandemic in the Nordic countries

Bengt Johansson,^I Øyvind Ihlen,^{II}
Jenny Lindholm,^{III} & Mark Blach-Ørsten^{IV}

^IDepartment of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

^{II}Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway

^{III}Political Science with Media and Communication, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

^{IV}Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark

Abstract

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are generally praised for their performance in terms of political and economic governance. The Nordic model, defined as a stable democratic welfare state, has been considered a role model internationally, but also used as a framework for research interpreting political communication, the media systems, as well as crisis management of Covid-19 in the Nordic countries. This edited volume takes the Nordic model as a point of departure, and scholars in crisis communication, media, journalism, political science, and rhetoric explore crisis communication in the Nordics during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapters compare experiences of strategic communication, media coverage, media use, and citizen response and point out both differences and similarities among the five countries. In this introductory chapter, we present the backdrop against which the empirical analyses can be understood. We discuss the Nordic model, give a brief overview of the Nordic experiences of Covid-19, and highlight the immense field of crisis communication research on Covid-19. In addition, the normative function of crisis communication during a pandemic is discussed, and also how to understand the specific risk culture in the Nordic countries. In the last part of the introduction, we give a short overview of the chapters of the book.

Keywords: Nordic crisis communication, the Nordic model, Covid-19, risk cultures, pandemic

Johansson, B., Ihlen, Ø., Lindholm, J., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2023). Introduction: Communicating a pandemic in the Nordic countries. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 11–30). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-1>

Introduction

In this book, we focus on crisis communication and what was arguably the most dramatic global event since World War II: namely, the Covid-19 pandemic. We study how Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden met this challenge through specific crisis communication strategies. The Nordics provide an excellent opportunity to study this form of communication given their relative similarity and the fact that one of them – Sweden – chose a different route to manage the pandemic than the others. In terms of similarities, the countries are said to rely on the so-called Nordic model, characterised as a combination of a social welfare system and market economy. The book sets out to investigate different aspects of how crisis communication was carried out in the Nordic countries and explore whether a Nordic model of crisis communication exists.

The volume mainly deals with crisis communication during 2020, which includes the first and second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some chapters apply a longer perspective, also focusing on the period until early 2022, when the pandemic, for all practical purposes, was declared over in the Nordic countries.

Throughout the book, we study strategic communication from governments, public health authorities, lobbyists, interest organisations, as well as corporations. The empirical material for the chapters includes speeches, press conferences, information campaigns, interviews, surveys, as well as social media activity. We also explore the media's coverage of the pandemic and how journalistic ideals were debated. Furthermore, we apply a citizen perspective, analysing information-seeking and reactions to the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Two introductory chapters (of which this is the first) provide the background by discussing crisis management from an administrative and communicative approach. In the present chapter, we present the structure of the book, briefly discuss crisis communication as an academic field and use broad strokes to paint a picture of the wealth of literature that has been published on crisis communication and Covid-19. First, however, we give a brief overview of both the so-called Nordic model and how it relates to crisis communication and Covid-19 as a global phenomenon.

The Nordic model and crisis communication

The Nordic countries' performance on different indicators (economic and social) has led to attempts and debates about the so-called Nordic model (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Ervasti et al., 2008; Hilson, 2008; Skogerbø et al., 2021). Three main components have been identified: first, a type of economic policy where the state is active, tax revenues are high, and open trade is emphasised; second, organised work life coordinating wage setting; and third, a social security net

provided by the welfare state (Fløtten & Trygstad, 2020). The welfare state is generous, but is accompanied by high work effort, small differences in wages, and high productivity (Barth et al., 2015). There has been a consensus around the Nordic model, where the state plays a central role and where principles of universalism and equality are key values (Arter, 2016). Another characteristic of the Nordic model is the corporatist tradition, in which interest groups are key players in the preparation and implementation of public policies (Christiansen et al., 2010). Moreover, a hallmark of this model is the three-way cooperation between employers, trade unions, and employer associations, which has been important, not least in limiting workplace conflict (Brandal et al., 2013).

The Nordic countries are small, and the power distance is relatively low, with open political systems. The level of political conflict is low; for example, violent strikes and other forms of spontaneous protests are rare, and even organisations criticising the state receive public funding and membership in public committees (Bortne et al., 2002; Christensen et al., 2002). Pragmatic policy-making and consensus solutions characterise the Nordic model (Lewin, 1998), and a vital civil society is a result of how the Nordic institutions work (Christiansen & Petersen, 2001; Rothstein, 2001). High levels of trust and social capital are explained as an effect of “(a) the high degree of economic equality, (b) the low level of patronage and corruption, and (c) the predominance of universal non-discriminating welfare programmes” (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003: 1). However, this description of the Nordic model has been under debate, and it is sometimes argued as being almost a myth driven by journalists (Arter, 2016). Others claim it leads to an unjustified idea of exceptionalism (Bengtsson et al., 2014). Another opinion concentrates on a development with larger differences between the countries over time, which makes it difficult to talk about a Nordic model (Calmfors, 2014). Even so, high levels of institutional and interpersonal trust differentiate the Nordics from other parts of the world. The European Social Survey and other surveys consistently show the Nordic countries at the top of rankings (European Social Survey, 2018). Even if the causality can be questioned (whether the societal traits discussed are sources or consequences of societal trust), the traits can be considered to create positive effects (Ihlen et al., 2022). In addition to these societal traits, a relative homogenous society in terms of ethnic and linguistic similarities contributes to explaining high levels of trust in the Nordics (Andreasson, 2017; Fukuyama, 1995). Thus, the political arrangements of the Nordic model are not the sole explanation for the high levels of trust.

The high levels of trust provided a good starting point for successful crisis communication when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the Nordic countries in 2020. Many studies show a strong relationship between institutional trust and compliance with following recommendations and protective behaviour during crisis (Johansson et al., 2021; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). The difference in trust

between societies has also led to the integration of trust in the framework to understand risk cultures. According to Cornia and colleagues (2016), a risk culture consists of disaster framing (how disasters are framed), disaster blaming (who is responsible for the disaster), and trust context (understood as trust in authorities).

Using focus group informants, three ideal types of risk cultures were identified: individual-oriented, fatalistic, and state-oriented. In an individual-oriented risk culture, people strongly rely on themselves to manage a crisis. Even if a crisis is unavoidable, consequences can at least be minimised with preventive measures, and individuals are themselves considered responsible for risk prevention. The role of the state in this case is to provide information before and during a crisis, but citizens cannot only rely on authorities for receiving information: They must seek information and manage their own life.

In the fatalistic risk culture, crises and especially disasters are not believed to be preventable. Disasters are perceived as unpredictable and unavoidable, since they are framed as an act, or punishment, of an external power: God, nature, or even fate. Low trust in authorities makes people disbelieve in their ability to manage the crisis, and individuals are not considered capable of handling the situation. Instead, there is a feeling of abandonment, powerlessness, and unpreparedness. Cornia and colleagues (2016) interpret this as a result of previous failures of crisis management – in other words, fatalism emerges when solutions focusing on state intervention or self-reliance appear to be ineffective.

In a state-oriented risk culture – just as in the individual-oriented risk culture – crises are believed to be preventable. However, in this culture, the state is the main actor to deal with risks and crises and is responsible for emergency management. People believe they are heavily dependent on the state, and self-reliance is not the central value. In this culture, trust in authorities as well as trust in public news media are high, and preparation for an emergency is attributed primarily to the state and not seen as a primary task of the citizens. In terms of crisis communication, information on how to handle the risk is a responsibility for experts and authorities, and the citizens' role is to comply according to the information provided.

Cornia and colleagues (2016) define Sweden as representative of the state-oriented risk culture, and due to the similarities described above, all Nordic countries could be considered as belonging to the state-oriented risk culture.

The Nordic countries also have many similarities in the transformation of the media system to a high-choice media environment, where citizens can use multiple sources to inform themselves about contemporary issues, like Covid-19. This new media society is sometimes also described as a hybrid media system, where social media and alternative media have become important parts of the media system, and where online and mobile communication has become the main channels for news consumption (Nord et al., 2021). Still,

the Nordics are characterised as having rather low levels of polarisation and populism communication, but with high levels of media trust and shared news consumption and strong public service media (Nord et al., 2021). So, despite the changes in the media system, the Nordic countries can still be considered as a rather stable communication environment, as some sort of “media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al., 2014; see also Lindell et al., 2022) relying heavily on legacy media (public service and daily press) for disseminating news. During the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists also emphasised the information function of the news media, taking responsibility for disseminating information from the authorities to the public (Johansson, 2021; see also Ghersetti et al., Chapter 10; Blach-Ørsten et al., Chapter 12).

In this type of media environment, crisis communication about Covid-19 centred around the daily press conferences held by the government and government authorities (see Kjeldsen, Chapter 5). The focus on press conferences was a bit surprising, as they represent a rather old channel for strategic communication, far from the networked twenty-four/seven flow of communication.

The daily press conferences, broadcasted on television and online news sites, informed the public about the development of the Covid-19 pandemic, the measures taken, and how to act in order to mitigate the spread of the virus: first about travel restrictions, social distancing, and the use of face masks, and later, when the national vaccination programmes were rolled out, the need to get vaccinated. Low political polarisation, high trust in authorities, and the importance of traditional news media for dissemination of news is a common trait among the Nordic countries, and it against this backdrop that the crisis communication of Covid-19 took place.

Covid-19: A global pandemic

The first reports about Covid-19 that reached the Nordic countries in December 2019 were short news stories about how a new disease was spreading from Wuhan, China. At this stage, nobody mentioned the word pandemic: It was seen as a local outbreak of a serious variant of pneumonia.

More worrying news arrived from Italy in February 2020, with stories describing overcrowded hospitals and reports about high death tolls. In the beginning of March, everything changed quickly. When the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the Nordic governments also changed their strategies. Until that point, the measures to handle the pandemic had focused on testing, isolation, contact tracing, and quarantine for international travellers, but the Danish government chose to shut down the country the same day that the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic, with Norway following suit the day after. A

lockdown was imposed with the introduction of strict measures, such as closing many shops, schools, and leisure activities. Borders were closed, and people entering the country needed to follow self-quarantine regulations (Ihlen et al, 2022). Similarly, the Finnish government declared a state of emergency in mid-March, closing schools and public facilities. In addition to restrictions for the national borders, Finland also closed the borders of the Uusimaa region (the capital region with the most confirmed cases) for three weeks. Iceland chose a somewhat different path: No lockdown was imposed, but some businesses were closed (e.g., gyms, hair salons), while others remained open with strict restrictions. Heavy testing and tracing were introduced as well as mandatory self-quarantine and testing for everyone entering the country (Ólafsson, 2021). The closed borders between countries were not only a drastic measure in relation to EU regulations (the Schengen Agreement), but even more to the Nordic passport union, which permits Nordic citizens to travel and reside in another Nordic country without any travel documentation. Closed borders between the Nordic countries created tensions and major problems for the many citizens commuting between the Nordic countries.

Sweden chose a different path to fight the pandemic. Borders remained open and the declared strategy was to meet the crisis with recommendations instead of regulations and trusting citizens' sense of responsibility, and society therefore to a large extent remained open (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; Pierre, 2020). However, restrictions on audience participation kept sports and cultural events to a minimum, even though stores, restaurants, gyms, and schools remained open (with remote teaching for older students). Instead of following recommendations from the World Health Organization to use face masks, Swedish authorities only recommended physical distancing, which became a major debate in Sweden and internationally created an image of Sweden as an outlier in terms of pandemic management (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; Johansson et al., 2021). Even if the Swedish strategy became more like the other Nordic countries' strategies over time, the crisis management is referred to as the "Swedish experiment" (Esaia-son et al., 2021; Lindholm & Högväg, 2021).

In comparison with many other countries, all Nordic countries remained more open: No curfew was imposed, and even if borders were closed, it was possible to travel domestically (with some restrictions). During early 2020, Covid-19 was spreading throughout the world, but some countries were more affected than others. Comparing the rising levels of infected people, and not least the death tolls in different countries, became an indicator of the success or failure of the chosen strategy to fight Covid-19. Many European countries experienced high death tolls from Covid-19: Italy was one of the worst affected, where more than 33,500 died 1 March–31 May 2020. During the same period, France and Spain had approximately 29,000 deaths. However, all three were exceeded by the situation in the UK, where more than 36,000 died. The Nordic

numbers were significantly lower: At the end of May 2020, Denmark had 577 deaths (population of 5.8 million), Finland 305 (population of 5.5 million), Norway 236 (population of 5.4 million), and Iceland only 10 (population of 367,000) (ECDC, 2022).

If Sweden had been seen as an interesting, but maybe dangerous experiment at the beginning of the first wave, the country's strategy of not closing borders and keeping restaurants, malls, and schools open now seemed reckless (Andersson & Aylott, 2020; Johansson & Vigsø, 2021), mostly because the death tolls rose dramatically during April and May, where the goal to protect the elderly living in care homes seemed to have failed. Sweden's death toll from Covid-19 was at the time much higher compared with the other Nordic countries. So, even though Sweden has a larger population (10.3 million), the pandemic hit the country much harder in comparison. At the end of May 2020, more than 4,500 people had died of Covid-19 in Sweden.

The evaluation of the Swedish Covid-19 strategy is still under debate. Some claim Sweden failed to handle the pandemic appropriately, and the Swedish Corona Commission pointed out several shortcomings, especially that the implemented measures were too limited and too late. The Swedish government was also criticised for relying too much on expert authorities like the Public Health Agency [Folkhälsomyndigheten] and not following recommendations proposed by the World Health Organization (SOU, 2021). Crisis communication was also evaluated as having deficits: being contradictory, lacking transparency, and being unprecise in recommendations (Rasmussen, 2022). But there is another story, where it is pointed out that some Swedish decisions seem to have been quite successful, for example, keeping schools open, and figures show that two years after the outbreak, Sweden came out as one of the least affected by Covid-19 from a European perspective when measuring excess mortality (Eurostat, 2022). However, in relation to the other Nordic countries, Sweden stands out; more than 20,000 people died of Covid-19 in Sweden, which is more than all the other Nordic countries combined. Thus, compared with the other Nordic countries, the Swedish Covid-19 strategy was probably less successful, but seen from a global perspective, Sweden did fairly well.

In general, crisis management of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordics was characterised by high trust in both government and government agencies, but a trustful relationship between institutions is also a common trait. Disputes were put aside between and inside organisations in order to handle the difficult situation (Brorström et al., 2021). The levels of public trust in the health institutions were remarkably high, especially during the early phases of the pandemic (Ihlen et al., 2022). When looking at political polarisation between government and opposition, it was, at least in the beginning of the pandemic, rather low. Government decisions in handling the pandemic were generally undisputed by the political opposition; over time, however, there were some

political controversies. In Sweden, these arose as the death tolls were rising. Still, due to the shared responsibility in Sweden's political system, where regions are responsible for healthcare and municipalities for elderly care, accountability work became fragmented (see Sandberg, Chapter 2). In Norway, it would take until the later phases of the pandemic before political skirmishes of significance were visible and political actors accused each other of trying to capitalise on the crisis. In Finland, the prime minister, Sanna Marin, was heavily criticised for going to clubs after being exposed to Covid-19 infection in December 2021. Later, it became known that two male ministers had also taken part in different events, but they escaped similar criticism. The discussion on gender and age was often present, since when Marin took office in December 2019, she was the world's youngest prime minister, and the Social Democrat-led coalition came to be led by five women mostly in their thirties. In Denmark, a crisis of trust arose in November 2020, when the government decided to euthanise all mink due to a risk assessment by the Statens Serum Institut, which concluded that the mink industry posed a serious threat to national health (Boswell et al., 2021). However, this decision turned out to be without legal basis, resulting in a scandal that led to both the exit of the minister of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, who was held responsible for the lack of legal basis, and to a drop in the overall trust in the governments' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic (Berlingske, 2022). It also led to a commission report scrutinising the decision to kill the mink, which ended up with heavy criticism of a number of top civil servants. The report also criticised the prime minister but put most of the blame on the civil servants (Parliament of Denmark, 2022).

The relationship between government and public health authorities could also generally be described as good in all the Nordic countries. Roles and responsibilities were defined and respected, and only in Denmark did a dispute arise between the Office of the Prime Minister and the health authorities. While the Danish health authorities hesitated to engage at the beginning of the pandemic, the government and the prime minister wanted a stronger, proactive strategy with more testing. The differences in strategies led to behind-the-scenes conflicts and to communication from the prime minister stating that different actions, such as imposing lockdowns, were taken due to advice from "authorities", when in fact it was mostly a political decision (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). No similar conflicts could be found in the other Nordic countries, although there were instances when the governments opted to ignore the advice from the public health authorities.

In retrospect, the Covid-19 management in the Nordic countries was for the most part evaluated positively. Finland, Iceland, and Norway had no serious controversies related to how Covid-19 was dealt with, and the change of government in Norway was not related to mismanagement of the pandemic. Even if the Norwegian Corona Commission chastised the government for its

lack of preparedness, their first report concluded that the Norwegian authorities had handled the Covid-19 pandemic well (NOU, 2021). A later evaluation report, which also addressed communication, again gave praise, with the exception of communication with minority groups (NOU, 2022) (see Backholm & Nordberg, Chapter 15, for a discussion of how minority language groups experienced pandemic communication from authorities). Similar conclusions of how the pandemic was handled can be found in Finland and Iceland, but also in Denmark (Olagnier, & Mogensen, 2020; Stenvall et al., 2022).

Overall, the Nordic countries were less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic compared with many other countries, both globally and from a European perspective. Even Sweden, with much higher death tolls than its Nordic neighbours, seems to have been more successful in managing the pandemic in comparison with many other countries. The polarisation in the Nordic societies was low – between institutions and citizens – when entering the crisis, and it more or less remained that way, even if there has been criticism concerning the handling of the pandemic as well. In Norway, a handful of medical experts were vocal about what they called the need for stronger measures to combat the pandemic – that is, they were arguing for stricter lockdowns, criticising the health authorities for not taking the challenge of the pandemic seriously enough (Kjeldsen et al., 2021). Similar discussions and critique were heard in the other Nordic countries. In Sweden, the debate about the use of face masks was a recurring issue, as the use was not mandatory or even recommended (Johansson et al., 2021). Still, large surveys indicate that the Nordic population for the most part was content with the management of the pandemic.

Crisis communication in a pandemic

There have been global crises long before Covid-19. Pandemics like the Spanish flu, HIV, and the Swine flu are all examples of diseases on a global scale. However, Covid-19 spread so quickly and was accompanied by high death tolls, and crisis responses from governments around the world were forceful. Things we have learned to take for granted were changed from one day to the next. Travel, or even going outside our own homes, became a matter of dispute, and personal integrity was no longer self-evident as surveillance of citizens increased. Prerequisites for crisis communication also changed in relation to previous global crises. The contemporary high-choice media environment, with an almost infinite amount of information sources available twenty-four/seven, is one such difference. Covid-19 stories saturated the public sphere in a way we never experienced before, and Covid-19 was the “only” news story for months as the entire society was affected by the crisis (see Ghersetti et al., Chapter 10). Another side of this infodemic focuses on the “post-truth society”,

where facts and scientific findings are contested and conspiracy theories flourish. The rise of social media and alternative news sites seem to have speeded up this development to a global level.

This societal or even global perspective of Covid-19 has accentuated the need to view crisis communication from a broad perspective as containing of number of subfields, where public crisis management focuses on public safety, political crisis management deals with political power, and corporate crisis management focuses on corporate reputation and stakeholder interest (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; see also Frandsen & Johansen, Chapter 8). This division of the field of crisis communication mirrors the roots of crisis communication in different academic disciplines, such as risk communication, emergency management, political communication, political science, organisational communication, corporate communication, and others (Auer et al., 2016; Rogers & Pearce, 2016; Roux-Dufort, 2016; Schneider & Jordan, 2016; Voss & Lorenz, 2016). When studying the Covid-19 pandemic, all three subfields are relevant, and all three perspectives are represented in chapters in this book.

A somewhat different way to map the field is to divide between organisational and societal perspectives on crisis communication, where the first one includes the political and corporate crisis management subfields mentioned above. Crisis communication is, seen from this viewpoint, mainly occupied with the survival of organisations (public or private) and its relation to different stakeholders. Both political and corporate crises are therefore examples of organisational crises. The societal perspective on crisis communication can also study organisations, but then not from a management perspective. Instead, organisations are seen from a system perspective, where, for example, a political crisis and its impact on the political system, or whether a government agency succeeds in informing the public, is analysed. Crises as societal issues are clearly related to public crisis management, mentioned above. Another aspect of the societal perspective is applying an audience perspective to crisis communication (Fraustino & Liu, 2018), where one strand of research highlights the relationships between organisations and its publics in order to formulate crisis response. The second perspective focuses on understanding and segmenting audiences. Finally, the third strand of research emphasises the public's emotions and coping strategies

When an audience perspective is proposed in the literature, it is sometimes done – implicitly or explicitly – with the purpose of communicating more effectively by having better knowledge of the target group or audience. Sometimes, the research is conducted from a bottom-up perspective, having citizens' rights and justice as a point of departure (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020).

Normative aspects like “rights” and “justice” can be applied both to organisational and societal aspects of crisis communication. An example is the principle of responsible communication, where an organisation that causes harm is responsible for the consequences, even if not intended. Such a framework can

of course challenge many other theories of crisis communication, as they are designed to avoid or distort accountability processes. A more societal normative perspective is the precautionary principle, which poses not to engage in risky (communication) behaviour when information is scarce or conflicting,

Moving to the audience perspective, normative approaches are also more or less outspoken. If applied, they mostly focus on citizens' right to information, where, for example, the significant choice perspective highlights a citizen's need for information that can help them make informed decisions, which can be in conflict with other citizens' right to privacy. Sellnow and Seeger (2020) also mentioned justice as an important ethical perspective on crisis communication, claiming that everyone should be treated in the same way (fairness), but also social justice, meaning everyone should have the same obligations and opportunities; distributive justice, defined as equitable distributions of resources; and restorative justice, where victims should receive justice and be publicly recognised and those responsible held to account. The ethics of justice is, as described above, not limited to communication aspects; rather, it also includes crisis management.

A framework which – from a citizen perspective – combines these normative citizen perspectives is the CCC model (Citizen Crisis Communication) (Odén et al., 2016). Central to the CCC model is the concept of capability, which is inspired by Nussbaum's work (1995), and the model stresses functions that citizens need as members of a society and how crisis communication can help strengthen these capabilities. The CCC model identifies three functions by which crisis communication enhances capabilities. The first one is to strengthen survival capabilities: Crisis communication should supply relevant, trustworthy, and understandable information about the situation, which is required for citizens to take appropriate action. Following this function, crisis communication should answer several questions: What has happened? Am I or my loved ones affected? What am I supposed to do? This function is often a central task for government and government agencies. This said, from a citizen perspective, it is not important who provides the information, as long as it is provided. News media, social media, friends, and family are also important suppliers of information that can improve citizens' survival capabilities.

The second function is connected to accountability and is named democratic capability, as citizens need information about who is responsible for causing the crisis and responsible for managing it, and to what extent the crisis management is appropriate and effective. This function is often connected to the journalistic norms of being a watchdog and doing accountability work. Journalism is crucial to this function, but just as for survival capabilities, other actors and sources, such as nongovernmental organisation, evaluating commissions, and ordinary citizens, can be important for accountability work.

The third function is social capabilities, which more precisely relates to information that publicly recognises the experiences of those affected by the crisis. Communication promoting social capabilities can also be about communicating hope, enhancing crisis preparedness, and strengthening interpersonal and societal trust. This type of communication can include everything from speeches by political leaders to hashtags on social media, where people are organising help for and solidarity with those affected by the crisis. News media stories can also fulfil this function by telling stories about communities “coming together”. These stories can be found in the pre-crisis phase as the community is preparing for a crisis, during the crisis when there are imminent problems to solve, and also in the post-crisis phase when recovery, renewal, and searching for a “new normal” is crucial for a community.

All three functions can be applied to crisis communication and Covid-19 and can also be found in different chapters in this book. In the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, focus was quite naturally on communicating to strengthen survival capabilities, since citizens needed information on how to protect themselves from the virus. Democratic capabilities became more visible after the first wave of the pandemic, and communication about how the pandemic was handled became more visible, where both governments and government agencies were criticised by both politicians and the news media. Communication that strengthens social capabilities could be found early on, as political leaders gave speeches to enhance society’s resilience.

Research on Covid-19 and crisis communication

Epidemics and pandemics have been previously studied by communication scholars, focusing on the historic event of the Spanish flu (Aassve et al., 2020) but also more recent incidents like SARS (Tyshenko, 2010) and the Swine flu (Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2019; Caduff, 2015; Kim & Liu, 2012). Norwegian risk communicators learnt several lessons from the Swine flu crisis, for instance, how disagreement about communication of uncertainties created public confusion (Brekke et al., 2017). Other previous research has given practical advice on, for instance, how to use social media during pandemics and other crisis situations (Hornmoen & Backholm, 2018).

Turning our attention to Covid-19, at the time of writing, a simple search in Google Scholar with the terms Covid-19 and communication yielded close to 3.3 million hits. It is a likely hypothesis that never before have researchers published so much on a particular topic in such a short period of time. To give a brief illustration, a handful of monographs have used approaches from, for instance, risk communication (Lazris & Rifkin, 2021), trust research (Robinson et al., 2021), and governance (Sinha, 2022). Anthologies have similarly drawn

on political communication (Lilleker et al., 2021b; Van Aelst & Blumler, 2022), risk communication (Wardman & Löfstedt, 2023), strategic communication (Tench et al., 2022), government communication (Maarek, 2022), argumentation (Oswald et al., 2022), science communication (O’Hair & O’Hair, 2021), media theory (Pollock & Vakoch, 2022), as well as the communication field in a broad sense (Kuypers, 2022; Lewis et al., 2021; Price & Harbisher, 2021). In addition, a host of special issues have been launched:

- *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (Meng & Tench, 2022)
- *Health Communication* (Nan & Thompson, 2020, 2021)
- *Journal of Health Communication* (Ratzan, 2020)
- *Journal of Risk Research* (Wardman & Lofstedt, 2020)
- *International Journal of Crisis and Risk Communication Research* (Jin et al., 2021)
- *Journal of Business Communication* (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2022)
- *Journal of Communication Management* (Ruck & Men, 2021)
- *Digital Journalism* (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021)
- *Howard Journal of Communication* (Sun, 2021)
- *Philosophy & Rhetoric* (Doxtader, 2020)

Add to this that the Covid-19 pandemic is a focus in several textbooks (e.g., Matusitz, 2022) and for journalistic investigations (e.g., Anderberg, 2021). Furthermore, key political players have also published books providing their own accounts of the events. Among the latter, in Norway, there are books from the former minister of health and care, as well as the general director of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [Folkhelseinstituttet], and a vice director of the Norwegian Directorate of Health [Helsedirektoratet] (Høie & Litland, 2022; Nakstad, 2021; Sølhusvik & Stoltenberg, 2021). In addition, journalists and various kinds of experts have given their view on the pandemic (Manzoor, 2021; Simonsen, 2022).

Suffice to say, it is an arduous task to provide a thorough review of all this literature. Particular aspects of the research are instead highlighted in the chapters of this volume; for example, we discuss how the rally-around-the-flag effect (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2022) fared in the Nordic countries (see Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

A second example is culled from the speedily published *Political Communication and COVID-19* (Lilleker et al., 2021b), which contained quick analysis from 27 countries. This volume seemed to confirm the importance of media-

tisation for effective communication strategies, as well as how personalisation provided the opportunity to deliver unifying messages (Lilleker et al., 2021a). We explore this further in the chapters in section 2.

Thirdly, *Journal of Risk Research* was also extraordinarily early when it published its special issue on Covid-19 in December 2020. Here, the editors were writing about different perspectives of risk and disagreement about the acceptable levels of harm (Wardman & Lofstedt, 2020). This aspect is addressed by Rasmussen, Ihlen, and Kjeldsen in Chapter 4, as it turned out to be a deciding factor in the strategy choice of the public health authorities in the Nordic countries, with Sweden, as noted, setting itself apart.

Finally, in a chapter in the edited volume *Strategic Communication in a Global Crisis* (Tench et al., 2022), we have also pointed to the importance of the Nordic model, since it provides a fertile ground for trust and in turn resilience (Ihlen et al., 2022). As already mentioned, this is an aspect we return to throughout the book and in the concluding chapter.

These are but a few of the topics covered in the large amount of literature mentioned above, a literature that is likely to grow even more in the years to come, as exemplified by the present volume.

Structure of the book

This book is structured in five sections, with the first, as mentioned, providing context. This introductory chapter has provided brief overviews of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries, as well as crisis communication, research on Covid-19 communication, and crisis communication relying on the Nordic model. Chapter 2, written by Siv Sandberg, provides an overview of the administrative organisation of crisis management in the Nordic countries.

Section II of the book turns to how politicians and government agencies have operated as crisis managers and communicators. In Chapter 3, Lars Nord and Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell discuss government communication during early 2020 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This is followed by a chapter written by Joel Rasmussen, Øyvind Ihlen, and Jens E. Kjeldsen, which focuses on differences in the communication of public health authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed the return of press conferences as an important event. In Chapter 5, Jens E. Kjeldsen analyses the multimodal rhetoric in use by both public health authorities and political leaders in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

A second important vehicle for communication during the Covid-19 pandemic was public campaigns. In Chapter 6, Pernille Almlund, Jens E. Kjeldsen, and Ragnhild Mølster analyse similarities and differences between Covid-19 campaigns in Scandinavia.

The notion of infodemic has been tied to the Covid-19 pandemic, not least since social media was replete with related content. In Chapter 7, Jenny Lindholm, Tom Carlson, Frederike Albrecht, and Helena Hermansson analyse how social media was utilised by Nordic health authorities and prime ministers.

The two final chapters in section II turn attention to the corporate sector: Finn Frandsen and Winni Johansen research how corporations and industry associations dealt with Covid-19 in the Scandinavian countries. Wiebke Marie Junk utilises interest-group literature to survey the question of lobbyists' access to politicians in Denmark and Sweden during the pandemic.

Section III contains three chapters on media coverage and discussion during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 10, written by Marina Ghersetti, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, and Sigrún Ólafsdóttir, interrogates the Icelandic and Swedish news coverage with regard to the informative and investigative roles of the media in a democratic society. In Chapter 11, Jannicke Fiskvik, Andrea Vik Bjarkø, and Tor Olav Grøtan delve into the discourse on Twitter and Facebook in Norway during the pandemic.

In the final chapter in section III, Mark Blach-Ørsten, Anna Maria Jönsson, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir, and Birgir Guðmundsson analyse the conditions in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden for investigative reporting during a time period when much of society was closed down.

Section IV introduces the citizen perspective. Bengt Johansson, Jacob Sohlberg, and Peter Esaiasson rely on survey research to explore how trust developed in the Nordic countries in Chapter 13. In Chapter 14, Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe analyse patterns in citizen's news use in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic. And finally, Chapter 15 is devoted to the issue of pandemic communication to vulnerable language minorities. The authors, Klas Backholm and Camilla Nordberg conduct a secondary analysis of relevant research from Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

The final section of the book, Section V, contains only one chapter, written by the editors, where we summarise and extrapolate on the research findings in the previous chapters. Again, a driving question is whether a Nordic model of crisis communication can be said to exist or not.

References

- Aassve, A., Alfani, G., Gandolfi, F., & Moglie, M. L. (2020). *Epidemics and trust: The case of the Spanish flu* (Working Papers 661). <https://ideas.repec.org/p/igi/igierp/661.html>
- Anderberg, J. (2021). *Flocken: Berättelsen om hur Sverige valde väg under pandemin* [The herd: The story of how Sweden chose its path during the pandemic]. Albert Bonniers.
- Andersson, S., & Aylott, N. (2020). Sweden and coronavirus: Unexceptional exceptionalism. *Social Sciences*, 9(12), 232. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9120232>
- Andreasson, U. (2017). *Trust – The Nordic gold*. Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Arter, D. (2016). *Scandinavian politics today* (3rd ed.). Manchester University Press.
- Auer, C., Schwarz, A., & Seeger, M. W. (2016). Communication – Conclusions for an integrative

- approach to international crisis communication research. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 66–72). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118516812.ch7>
- Barth, E., Moene, K. O., & Willumsen, F. (2015). The Scandinavian model – An interpretation. *Journal of Public Economics*, 127, 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2014.04.001>
- Bengtsson, Å., Hansen, K. M., Harðarson, Ó. þ., Narud, H. M., & Oscarsson, H. (2014). *The Nordic voter: Myths of exceptionalism*. ECPR Press.
- Berlingske. (2022, July 2). *Professor: Minksag svækker tillid til politikere* [Professor: Mink case weakens trust in politicians]. <https://www.berlingske.dk/danmark/professor-minksag-svaekker-tillid-til-politikere>
- Bjørkdahl, K., & Carlsen, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Pandemics, publics, and politics: Staging responses to public health crises*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2802-2>
- Bortne, Ø., Selle, P., & Strømsnes, K. (2002). *Miljøvern uten grenser?* [Environmental conservation without boundaries?] Gyldendal.
- Boswell, J., Corbett, J., Rhodes, R. A. W., & Salomonsen, H. H. (2021). The comparative ‘court politics’ of Covid-19: Explaining government responses to the pandemic. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1258–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942159>
- Brandal, N., Bratberg, Ø., & Thorsen, D. (2013). *The Nordic model of social democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137013279>
- Brekke, O. A., Ludvigsen, K., & Bjørkdahl, K. (2017). Handling og usikkerhet: Norske myndigheters kommunikasjon om sveineinfluensapandemien i 2009 [Action and uncertainty: Norwegian authorities’ communication on the 2009 swine flu pandemic]. *Norsk statsvitenskapelig tidsskrift*, 32(01), 54–77. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2593332>
- Brorström, B., Johansson, B., & Kastberger Weichselberger, G. (2021). *Godkänt, men med förbehåll – Västra Götalandsregionens hantering av coronapandemin. En utvärdering med fokus på styrning, organisation och ledning* [Approved, but with reservations – Region West Götaland’s handling of the corona pandemic. An evaluation focusing on management, organisation and leadership]. KFI-rapport 167. Kommunforskning i Väst.
- Caduff, C. (2015). *The pandemic perhaps: Dramatic events in a public culture of danger*. University of California Press.
- Calmfors, L. (2014). How well is the Nordic model doing? Recent performance and future challenges. In T. Valkonen, & V. Vihriälä (Eds.), *The Nordic model – Challenged but capable of reform* (pp. 17–89). Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Christensen, T., Lagreid, P., Egeberg, M., & Aars, J. (2002). *Forvaltning og politikk* [Administration and politics]. Fagbokforlaget.
- Christiansen, N. F., & Petersen, K. (2001). The dynamics of social solidarity: The Danish welfare state, 1900–2000. *Scandinavian journal of history*, 26(3), 177–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/034687501750303846>
- Christiansen, P. M., Nørgaard, A. S., Rommetvedt, H., Svensson, T., Thesen, G., & Öberg, P. (2010). Varieties of democracy: Interest groups and corporatist committees in Scandinavian policy making. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 21(1), 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-009-9105-0>
- Cornia, A., Dressel, K., & Pfeil, P. (2016). Risk cultures and dominant approaches towards disasters in seven European countries. *Journal of Risk Research*, 19(3), 288–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.961520>
- Doxtader, E. (2020). Editor’s note: In the midst of ...? *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 53(3), vi–ix. <https://doi.org/10.5325/phlrrhet.53.3.vi>
- ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control). (2022, October 27). *Data on the daily number of new reported Covid-19 cases and deaths by EU/EEA country*. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/data-daily-new-cases-covid-19-eueea-country>
- Ervasti, H., Fridberg, T., Hjerm, M., & Ringdal, K. (2008). The Nordic model. In H. Ervasti, T. Fridberg, M. Hjerm, & K. Ringdal (Eds.), *Nordic social attitudes in a European perspective* (pp. 1–22). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Esaiaasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects

- citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from 'the Swedish experiment'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- European Social Survey. (2018). ESS9-2018. <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>
- Eurostat. (2022). Excess mortality – statistics. Retrieved November 14, 2022, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Excess_mortality_-_statistics
- Fløtten, T., & Trygstad, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Post korona – en ny fase for den nordiske modellen?* [Post corona – A new phase for the Nordic model?] FAFO.
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2020). Reframing the field: Public crisis management, political crisis management, and corporate crisis management. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication* (pp. 59–102). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Fraustino, J. D., & Liu, B.D. (2018). Toward more audience-oriented approaches to crisis communication and social media research. In L. Austin, & Y. Jin (Eds.), *Social media and crisis communication* (pp. 129–140). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315749068>
- Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. Free Press.
- Hilson, M. (2008). *The Nordic model: Scandinavia since 1945*. Reaktion Books.
- Hornmoen, H., & Backholm, K. (2018). *Social media use in crisis and risk communication*. Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787562691>
- Høie, B., & Litland, J. (2022). *Uro i koronaens tid* [Unrest in the age of corona]. Gyldendal.
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Á. Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic* (pp. 184–198). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669-17>
- Johansson, B. (2021). Med beröm godkänt: Journalisternas syn på kriskommunikation och journalistik [With honors passed. Journalists' opinions on crisis communication and journalism]. In L. Truedson (Ed.), *Journalistik i coronans tid* [Journalism in the age of corona]. Institutet för mediestudier.
- Johansson, B., Sohlberg, J., Esaiasson, P., & Ghersetti, M. (2021). Why Swedes don't wear face masks during the pandemic – A consequence of blindly trusting the government. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2), 335–358. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.4.2.6>
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Sweden: Lone hero of stubborn outlier? In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 155–164). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Jin, Y., Choi, S. I., & Diers-Lawson, A. (2021). Special issue editor's essay: Advancing public health crisis and risk theory and practice via innovative and inclusive research on Covid-19 communication. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2).
- Kim, S., & Liu, B. F. (2012). Are all crises opportunities? A comparison of how corporate and government organizations responded to the 2009 flu pandemic. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(1), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726x.2012.626136>
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Ihlen, Ø., Just, S. N., & Larsson, A. O. (2021). Expert ethos and the strength of networks: Negotiations of credibility in mediated debate on Covid-19. *Health Promotion International*, 37(2), daab095. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab095>
- Kuypers, J. A. (Ed.). (2022). *Public communication in the time of Covid-19: Perspectives from the communication discipline on the pandemic*. Lexington.
- Lazris, A., & Rifkin, E. (2021). *Utilizing effective risk communication in Covid-19*. Springer.
- Lewin, L. (1998). Majoritarian and consensus democracy: The Swedish experience. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 21(3), 195–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.1998.tb00012.x>
- Lewis, M., Govender, E., & Holland, K. (Eds.). (2021). *Communicating Covid-19: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lilleker, D., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (2021a). Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in global comparative perspective. In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 333–350). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>

- Lilleker, D., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (Eds.). (2021b). *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Lindell, J., Jakobsson, P., & Stiernstedt, F. (2022). The media welfare state: A citizen perspective. *European Journal of Communication*, 37(3), 330–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211046792>
- Lindholm, J., & Högvåg, J. (2021). Emotionell räddning? Visuell kriskommunikation under coronakrisens inledande skede – fallet Finland [Emotional rescue? Visual crisis communication during the initial phase of the corona crisis – the case of Finland]. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 123(5), 241–267. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/23310/20733>
- Maarek, P. J. (Ed.). (2022). *Manufacturing government communication on Covid-19: A comparative perspective*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09230-5>
- Manzoor, A. (2021). *Pandemi! Från spanska sjukan till covid-19 [Pandemic! From the Spanish flu to Covid-19]*. Fri tanke.
- Matusitz, J. (2022). *Fundamentals of public communication campaigns*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Mayfield, J., & Mayfield, M. (2022). Business communication lessons in agility: Introduction to the special issue on the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 59(2), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884221077813>
- Meng, J., & Tench, R. (2022). Strategic communication and the global pandemic: Leading through unprecedented times. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16(3), 357–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2075750>
- Nakstad, E. R. (2021). *Kode rød: Kampen for the vakre [Code red: The fight for what is beautiful]*. Gyldendal.
- Nan, X., & Thompson, T. (2020). Introduction to the special forum on “public health communication in an age of Covid-19”. *Health Communication*, 35(14), 1705–1706. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1840754>
- Nan, X., & Thompson, T. (2021). Introduction to the special issue on “public health communication in an age of Covid-19”. *Health Communication*, 36(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1853330>
- Nord, L., Skogerbø, E., & Nørgaard, N. (2021). Conclusion: Nordic political communication between change and continuity. In E. Skogerbø, Ø. Ihlen, N. N. Kristensen, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries* (pp. 385–396). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855299-19>
- NOU (Official Norwegian Reports). (2021). *NOU 2021:6 Myndighetenes håndtering av koronapandemien [NOU 2021:6 The authorities' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic]*. Oslo, Norway.
- NOU (Official Norwegian Reports). (2022). *NOU 2022:5 Myndighetenes håndtering av koronapandemien – del 2 [NOU 2022:5 The authorities' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic – part 2]*. Oslo, Norway.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). Human capabilities, female human beings. In M. C. Nussbaum, & J. Glover (Eds.), *Women, culture, and development: A study of human capabilities* (pp. 105–115). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198289642.001.0001>
- Odén, T., Djerf-Pierre, M., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2016). *Kriskommunikation 2.0: Allmänhet, medier och myndigheter i det digitala medielandskapet [Crisis communication 2.0: The public, media and public authorities in the digital media landscape]*. MSB.
- O’Hair, D. O., & O’Hair, M. J. (Eds.). (2021). *Communicating science in times of crisis: Covid-19 Pandemic*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2021). Iceland: No lockdown and experts at the forefront. In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 239–247). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Olagnier, D., & Mogensen, T. H. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Denmark: Big lessons from a small country. *Cytokine & Growth Factor Reviews*, 53, 10–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cytogfr.2020.05.005>
- Oswald, S., Lewinski, M., Greco, S., & Villata, S. (Eds.). (2022). *The pandemic of argumentation*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4>

- Parliament of Denmark. (2021). *Håndteringen af covid-19 i foråret 2020* [Handling of the Covid-19 in 2020] [Report submitted by the inquiry group set up by the Norwegian Parliament's Committee on the Rules of Procedure regarding the handling of covid-19]. Folketinget.
- Parliament of Denmark. (2022). *Granskningskommissionens beretning om sagen om aflivning af mink* [The Inquiry commission's report on the case of culling mink]. Folketinget.
- Pierre, J. (2020). Nudges against pandemics: Sweden's Covid-19 containment strategy in perspective. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 478–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2020.1783787>
- Pollock, J. C., & Vakoch, D. A. (Eds.). (2022). *Covid-19 in international media: Global pandemic perspectives*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181705>
- Price, S., & Harbisher, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Power, media and the Covid-19 pandemic: Framing public discourse*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003147299>
- Quandt, T., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2021). The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1199–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996253>
- Rasmussen, J. (2022). *Frågor om tydlighet och samstämmighet i den svenska riskkommunikationen om covid-19 under våren 2020* [Questions about clarity and consistency in Swedish risk communication about Covid-19 in spring 2020] [Background report to SOU 2022:10 Sweden during the pandemic]. Regeringskansliet.
- Ratzan, S. C. (2020). Vaccine communication in a pandemic: Improving vaccine literacy to reduce hesitancy, restore trust and immunize communities: Editor's introduction. *Journal of Health Communication*, 25(10), 745–746. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1884774>
- Robinson, S. E., Gupta, K., Ripberger, J., Ross, J. A., Fox, A., Jenkins-Smith, H., & Silva, C. (2021). *Trust in government agencies in the time of Covid-19*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rogers, M. B., & Pearce, J. M. (2016). The psychology of crisis communication. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 34–44). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118516812.ch4>
- Rothstein, B. (2001). Social capital in the social democratic welfare state. *Politics & Society*, 29(2), 207–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329201029002003>
- Rothstein, B., & Stolle, D. (2003). Introduction: Social capital in Scandinavia. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.t01-1-00077>
- Roux-Dufort, C. (2016). Delving into the roots of crisis crises: The genealogy of surprise. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 24–33). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118516812.ch3>
- Ruck, K., & Men, L. R. (2021). Guest editorial: Internal communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Communication Management*, 25(3), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-08-2021-163>
- Schneider, S. K., & Jordan, M. P. (2016). Political science research on crises and crisis communication. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 11–23). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118516812.ch2>
- Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2020). *Theorizing crisis communication* (2nd ed.). Wiley Blackwell.
- Siegrist, M., & Zingg, A. (2014). The role of public trust during pandemics: Implications for crisis communication. *European Psychologist*, 19(1), 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000169>
- Simonsen, L. (2022). *Hvordan håndterer vi fremtidens pandemier?* [How do we manage future pandemics?] Informations Forlag.
- Sinha, D. (2022). *Pandemic, governance and communication: The curious case of Covid-19*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003247388>
- Skogerbø, E., Kristensen, N. N., Nord, L., & Ihlen, Ø. (2021). Introduction: A Nordic model for political communication? In E. Skogerbø, Ø. Ihlen, N. N. Kristensen, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries* (pp. 13–27). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855299-1>
- SOU (Swedish Government Official Reports). (2021). *Delbetänkande 2 _ Sverige under pandemin* [Interim Report2_Sweden during the pandemic] (SOU 2021:89). <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2021/10/sou-202189/>
- Stenvall, J., Leskelä, R.-L., Rannisto, P.-H., Tolkki, H., Cansel, A., Leponiemi, U., Johanson, J.-E., Pekkola, E., & Tupala, T. (2022). *Koronajohtaminen Suomessa Arvio covid-19-pandemian*

- johtamisesta ja hallinnosta syksystä 2020 syksyyn 2021 [Corona management in Finland. Assessment of the management and administration of the covid-19 pandemic from autumn 2020 to autumn 2021]* (Report 2022:34). Valtioneuvostonselvitys ja tutkimustiimon julkaisusarja.
- Sun, W. (2021). Introduction to the special issue: “Media and communication during the Covid-19 (coronavirus) pandemic”. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 32(5), 415–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2021.1966857>
- Syvertsen, T., Enli, G., Mjøs, O. J., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. The University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001>
- Søhlusvik, L., & Stoltenberg, C. (2021). *Året som aldri tok slutt [The year that never ended]*. J. M. Stenersens forlag.
- Tench, R., Meng, J., & Moreno, Á. (Eds.). (2022). *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669>
- Tyshenko, M. G. (2010). *SARS unmasked: Risk communication of pandemics and influenza in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Van Aelst, P., & Blumler, J. G. (Eds.). (2022). *Political communication in the time of coronavirus*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170051>
- Voss, M., & Lorenz, D. F. (2016). Sociological foundations of crisis communication. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 45–55). Wiley Blackwell.
- Wardman, J. K., & Lofstedt, R. (2020). Covid-19: Confronting a new world risk. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(7-8), 833–837. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1842988>
- Wardman, J. K., & Löfstedt, R. E. V. (Eds.). (2023). *Covid-19: Confronting a new world risk*. Routledge.

The role of administrative tradition in government responses to crises

A comparative overview of five Nordic countries

Siv Sandberg

Department of Political Science, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to compare how the various responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by the governments of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland relate to the different administrative traditions and models of governance in these countries. For example, the Nordic countries differ in the degree of discretion that individual ministers have to propose actions within their area of responsibility. In this chapter, I examine to what extent these differences are reflected in the policies these five countries undertook in order to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, and I provide a framework for understanding these policy choices. The differences in how the Nordic countries responded to the Covid-19 pandemic have puzzled observers, especially the contrast between Sweden's reliance on soft policy measures and Denmark's rapid and centralised crisis management. Although the Covid-19 crisis is unique in many respects, a comparison of Nordic governance models and administrative traditions is important for understanding why the countries acted differently.

Keywords: government response comparison, models of governance, multi-level governance, administrative traditions, Nordic Covid-19 policies

Introduction

Politics and administration intertwine with the everyday lives of Nordic citizens, but usually, political and administrative issues have an appropriate time

Sandberg, S. (2023). The role of administrative tradition in government responses to crises: A comparative overview of five Nordic countries. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 31–50). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-2>

and place. Few citizens are aware of how the chain of command between the national government and health authorities works or, for example, which authority is entitled to close schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the complex structures of governance in modern societies and provoked new interest in how institutions of governance work and interconnect (Kuhlmann & Francke, 2022). Since early 2020, the heterogeneity in government responses to the Covid-19 crisis has puzzled social scientists around the world (see, e.g., Askim & Bergström, 2022; Bouckaert et al., 2020).

The Nordics are no exception to this rule; although they share many similarities, there is considerable variation in how the five countries responded when the pandemic reached a critical stage in March 2020 (see, e.g., Saunes et al., 2022). This has caused general observers of politics, as well as social scientists, to raise questions about the institutional framework behind the Nordic policy responses. The reasons for the different choices of strategy are various and complex, but some of them trace back to basic differences in how the Nordic countries are organised and governed. One such basic difference is in how far-reaching the actions proposed by individual cabinet ministers, in their field of responsibility, can be (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016). Another significant difference relates to variations in the degree of centralisation of the healthcare systems (Saunes et al., 2022).

My aim with this chapter is to present a comparative overview of the politico-administrative systems of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and to analyse the implications of the detected similarities and differences among the Nordic government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. In so doing, this chapter contextualises the comparative analyses of political communication presented in the other chapters of this book. This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main similarities and differences in the principles for division of labour between the actors within the core executive of the Nordic countries, that is, the government as a whole, government ministers, and the central government agencies?
- RQ2. What are the patterns in the Nordic governments' usage of governance tools during the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how do these patterns relate to the basic differences in models of governance?
- RQ3. What are the main similarities and differences in the organisation of the Nordic healthcare systems? How do these differences relate to the different administrative heritages of the Nordic countries?

Similarities and differences between the Nordic models of governance

Similarities of Nordic politico-administrative systems

In global and European comparisons of political systems, the Nordics usually form a distinct group of their own. The Nordic countries are all parliamentary democracies, and their common administrative tradition is known for a rule-of-law culture, transparency, and accessibility of administration for the citizenry. This includes well-developed administrative systems, merit-based bureaucratic professionalism, and long traditions of semi-autonomous central agencies, as well as greater autonomy of the central bureaucracy than in the rest of Europe (Greve et al., 2016; Lægheid, 2017).

The Nordic countries are decentralised unitary states, where subnational government plays a crucial role in the provision of public services to citizens. Like in other modern states, government activities at national and subnational levels interlink in various ways, through vertical coordination within policy sectors and through horizontal coordination by multifunctional local governments (Kuhlman & Francke, 2022). Compared with most other European countries, Nordic subnational governments enjoy considerable financial and functional autonomy, which means that local and regional governments have a strong mandate to make decisions within the legal responsibilities given to them concerning education, healthcare, and social services (Ladner et al., 2019).

Differences in West Nordic and East Nordic administrative heritages

Although the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is unique, the initial policy responses to the crisis highlighted institutional differences in the division of labour between institutions of government in the Nordics. Observers of the pandemic policies of the Nordic countries have noticed the differences in the positions of individual ministers in the implementation of actions against the pandemic. One extreme example is the decision of the Danish minister of environment and food in late 2020 to have all minks at Danish fur farms slaughtered in order to prevent spread of the virus by minks (Danish Ministry of Environment and Food, 2020).

A traditional way of describing the politico-administrative systems of the Nordic countries is to distinguish between West Nordic and East Nordic administrative traditions. This distinction dates back centuries, to the time when Finland was part of the Swedish Empire and Norway and Iceland belonged to Denmark. The countries have established different rules and norms based on their own traditions for the division of power between government and administration. The West Nordic model, typical for Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, builds on the idea of undivided power. This model grants government ministers

influence over activities within the scope of their department. The dualistic East Nordic model, typical for Finland and Sweden, restricts the influence of the government by granting administrative authorities' considerable autonomy (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016; Wenander, 2016, 2019).

In modern Nordic governments, the most important difference between the administrative traditions concerns the scope of action of individual cabinet ministers. The scope of action is defined both in relation to the cabinet as a whole and in relation to civil service. The former represents the extent to which an individual minister is able to act independently, and the latter to what extent a minister is allowed to intervene in the actions of public authorities within their domain. A related feature concerns the degree of autonomy of public authorities in relation to the government and the ministers (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016).

In Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, ministerial governance is the rule (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016; Bergman et al., 2004; Wenander, 2016), where individual ministers are responsible for all activities within the domain of their own ministry, but they also have the legal right to instruct and intervene in actions of public authorities within their area of government. Furthermore, individual ministers are relatively independent vis-à-vis the cabinet. Although ministers possess the right to intervene in the activities of the administration subordinate to the ministry, it is important to notice that Danish and Norwegian public authorities enjoy considerable autonomy with regard to political leadership (Greve et al., 2016). Normally, the government communicates the political guidelines for the activities of individual authorities through legislation, budgets, and formal instructions. The legal mechanisms for Danish and Norwegian ministers to intervene in activities of subordinate authorities are, however, stronger than in Sweden and Finland. The Icelandic administration is small, and the division of labour between the parliament, the cabinet, and public authorities is more fluid than in the larger Nordic countries. This is seen to further strengthen the position of individual ministers (Kristjánsson, 2004; Greve et al., 2016).

In the East Nordic model, possibilities for ministers – or for the cabinet as a whole – to intervene in the activities of public authorities are limited. The relationship between the political leadership and government authorities can be described as “at arm’s length”: The government can instruct the activities of independent authorities by legislation, budget allowances, and formal instructions, but not through the intervention of individual ministers or the government as a whole in decisions or actions assigned to the authority by law.

In Finland, the position of individual ministers within their own area of government is, however, relatively strong and is partly equivalent to the position of a minister in Norway. Government authorities are subordinate to individual ministries, not to the government as a whole – the opposite of Sweden.

The Swedish constitution limits the scope of action of individual ministers in two ways: Ministers are not allowed to intervene in the decisions and actions of the administration within their sector of government, and furthermore, the constitution emphasises the position of the cabinet members as a collective, not as leaders of their respective ministries. Deviating from the rest of the Nordic countries, Swedish government authorities are subordinate to the government as a whole, not to individual ministries (Bergman, 2004; Wenander, 2019).

Table 2.1 *Basic features in the Nordic models of governance*

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Administrative heritage	West Nordic	East Nordic	West Nordic	West Nordic	East Nordic
Position of individual ministers in relation to cabinet as a whole	independent	independent	independent	independent	collective
Scope of action of individual ministers with regard to the public authorities within domain of government	large	limited	large	large	limited
Degree of autonomy of public authorities vis-à-vis government	medium	high	medium	medium	high

Source: Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016; Bergman et al., 2004

Table 2.1 sums up the basic features of the Nordic countries with regard to the scope of action of individual ministers and the relationship between government, department, and public authorities. Even though basic differences between the West and East Nordic models remain with regard to both the scope of action of individual ministers and the autonomy of public authorities vis-à-vis the government, the most striking difference is between Sweden and the rest of the countries (see Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016). The Swedish model – based on the principle of collective governance and autonomous public authorities – deviates from the general Nordic pattern where ministers enjoy a considerable degree of individual discretion in the pursuit of their duties.

Similarities and differences in government responses to the pandemic

The following section gives a brief overview of similarities and differences in the Nordic governments' choices of policy tools during the most intense first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 and examines to what extent the observations relate to the basic differences in governance models described in the previous section.

The increased divergence in the policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic took place after the pandemic expanded from being a medical crisis to also being a societal and political crisis. Until March 2020, all of the Nordic countries were handling the pandemic according to their respective guidelines for fighting communicable diseases, with health authorities and experts as the main actors. Later, the countries' paths diverged in terms of choosing policy tools and in the division of labour between politicians and experts. In the absence of vaccines and medication suitable to fight the spreading of the new virus, non-medical containment and mitigation actions were the only tools available to governments. Actions to restrict the number of interactions between people required broad involvement from, and affected the activities of, citizens, companies, and all branches of the public sector. March 2020 marked a turn in the salience of the Covid-19 pandemic for the national political agendas of all five Nordic countries. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway noticed a shift from expert leadership to political leadership. As the governing of the pandemic became the duty of the highest political leadership in these four countries, the role of experts and government authorities became less prominent. All four of these countries implemented containment measures similar to those of many other European countries, including lock-downs and school closures (Saunes et al., 2022). Finland, Iceland, and Norway activated civil protection or emergency powers legislation, which equipped the national governments with competencies they do not normally possess.

The Swedish government acted in a partly, but not totally, different way from its neighbours. The recommendations from the national health authority continued to play a central role for the policy choices of the Swedish government. Furthermore, Sweden relied on the public voluntarily aligning with general recommendations given by the government and the authorities, and consequently implemented fewer binding containment measures than the other Nordic countries. In other respects, including the cancellation of public events, labour market policies, and support packages for businesses negatively affected by the restrictions, Swedish government policies were, to a large extent, similar to those of other equivalent countries (Askim & Bergström, 2022; Christensen & Lægread, 2020; Government of Norway, 2021; Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Safety Investigation Authority of Finland, 2021; SOU, 2021, 2022; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic differed from previous civil crises both in duration and in scope, and therefore required a unique set of governance tools and institutions (Peters, 2018). The reports of national investigatory committees as well as academic research reports indicate that the crisis management organisations in the Nordics combined features of the politico-administrative systems with ad hoc organisations and mechanisms invented for the occasion (Askim & Bergström, 2021; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020; Government of Norway, 2021; Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Safety Investigation Authority of Finland, 2021; Saunes et al., 2022; SOU, 2021; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2020).

The Danish expert commission evaluating the government's actions during the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic notes that the crisis activated three sets of governance institutions within the Danish central administration: the normal organisation of ministries and national authorities with established procedures of support to the government and individual ministers; the dormant national crisis management organisation; and specific institutions for Covid-19 management established in early March 2020 (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). This overall picture is also valid for the other Nordic countries.

Another common point of departure is that, in the initial stage of the pandemic, all the Nordic countries lacked legislation and policy tools specifically designated for governing a global pandemic. Existing legislation on communicable diseases was adapted for minor local outbreaks of infectious diseases, not for a situation affecting a country's whole population. Correspondingly, the dormant national crisis organisations had usually been constructed for other types of crises; this forced governments to use the instruments and organisations readily available, following the logic of appropriateness of the existing institutional setting and the national political culture (March & Olsen, 2011). Finland, Iceland, and Norway invoked national preparedness acts in March in order to empower the government to make countrywide decisions about restrictions. Denmark chose not to activate its preparedness legislation, while Sweden lacks equivalent legislative mechanisms for civil emergencies (Saunes et al., 2022). The policy choices made reflect earlier crisis management experiences and policies. Iceland is a good example of this. Building on experiences from the 2008 global financial crisis, the focus of Icelandic government policies during the pandemic was on mitigating negative effects on households (Government of Iceland, 2020; Saunes et al., 2022).

The description and comparison below mainly cover policies implemented in the first six months of the Covid-19 crisis. It is, however, important to notice that the responses of the Nordic countries underwent changes several times after the World Health Organization declared it a global pandemic. In Denmark, Finland, and Norway, the focus of the Covid-19 policies shifted several times between a national and a local focus, depending both on the situation and the

policy instruments in use at each given time. Sweden relied on a noncoercive and decentralised policy model throughout the pandemic, but the choice of policy instruments varied at different stages, while Icelandic Covid-19 policies stayed relatively consistent due to a lower number of actors and levels in the healthcare system (Saunes et al., 2022). This kind of variation in policies throughout the course of the pandemic is not unique to the Nordics; we can observe similar patterns in other European countries (Kuhlmann & Francke, 2022).

When a society faces a crisis, people seek clear direction – they want to know who is in charge. At the same time, modern societies reflect the principle of shared power, with divided responsibilities between different political institutions, between politics and administration, between national and subnational government, and between public and private actors. This is one of the persistent tensions of crisis management in modern societies (Boin & 't Hardt, 2003). Even if research findings on public leadership during crises indicate that responses should be multiorganisational, transjurisdictional, and polycentric in order to be efficient in a complex society, it is hard to ignore the popular and political pressure to centralise authority (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Christensen et al., 2016; John, 2011; Peters, 2018).

The actions of the Nordic governments in the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic included several common traits typical of crisis management, one being the centralisation of decision-making powers to the cabinet. This centralisation included a transfer of powers from the parliament to the cabinet, including faster and simplified processes for passing new legislation. Policies also included – to various degrees in different countries – the centralisation of powers from subnational authorities and independent government agencies to the cabinet. The streamlining of policy choices included national decrees concerning the closure of schools and daycare centres, which is normally the responsibility of local and regional authorities (Government of Norway, 2021; Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Saunes et al., 2022).

Does administrative heritage matter?

To illustrate the observation that governments tended to use readily available instruments for the purpose of managing the Covid-19 pandemic, we can take a closer look at some of the legislative instruments activated in early 2020. These instruments can also be used as a starting point for discussing the importance of the different administrative heritages for the Covid-19 responses of the Nordic governments.

In Denmark, temporary amendments to the Act on Communicable Diseases functioned as the main instrument of strengthening the governance capabilities of the national government. In practice, the new legislation strengthened

the mandate of the minister for health and senior citizens in order to ensure the possibility of rapid decision-making concerning, for example, the closure of schools and other facilities (Government of Denmark, 2020; Parliament of Denmark, 2021). To sum up, the Danish use of governance instruments expanded the initially large discretion of Danish ministers in relation to the government agencies and other societal actors. The evaluation of the Danish Covid-19 policies is that the chosen strategy was extremely centralising (Parliament of Denmark, 2021).

The Norwegian government and parliament activated two legislative instruments, the Emergency Health Preparedness Act from 2000 and a temporary act, “The Corona Law” (Government of Norway, 2020), to authorise extraordinary actions of the cabinet during the first stage of the pandemic (Government of Norway, 2021; Saunes et al., 2022). The temporary act was valid for one month at a time and was activated from March to May 2020. Although most actors recognised the need to strengthen the mandate of the cabinet during this time of crisis, the first draft of the temporary act gained much critique, since it would have bypassed normal parliamentary procedure. The final version of the act reinforced the role of the parliament in the activation of crisis legislation. Furthermore, the parliament stated that the act should not be used unnecessarily if matters could be solved with the regular legislation process (Government of Norway, 2021).

Iceland activated its Civil Protection Act early on in March 2020, but otherwise relied on the policy instruments available in the current health security legislation (Saunes et al., 2022). Iceland relied on experience from the 2008 financial crisis when designing its Covid-19 responses, but on the whole, centralising powers to the national government was less controversial than in the other Nordic countries, since healthcare is a national responsibility, and the total number of actors in the Icelandic politico-administrative system is small.

The Danish, Icelandic, and Norwegian examples illustrate three ways of acting within the same administrative heritage (the West Nordic model; see Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016). While the Danish temporary legislation reinforced the already strong position of the cabinet and its ministers, Norway employed a more cautious strategy with regard to expanding the scope of governmental action at the expense of parliamentary control and normal administrative procedure. Icelandic Covid-19 policies appear less deviant from the ordinary model, but underline the strong position of ministers and the cabinet.

Within the East Nordic model, Finland and Sweden adapted seemingly opposite strategies from March to June 2020. Deviating from governments in many other countries, the Swedish government was reluctant to utilise extraordinary legislative powers to manage the emerging Covid-19 crisis (Askim & Bergström, 2022; SOU, 2022). The Swedish government, however, presented a temporary amendment to the Act on Communicable Diseases with regard to the closure

of public places (Government of Sweden, 2019). With the exception of policies set to mitigate the financial effects of the pandemic, the Swedish government acted mostly within the ordinary frames of the politico-administrative system (SOU, 2022). As noted above, the Swedish model is characterised by collective political leadership and autonomous government authorities (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2020). According to the evaluation of the actions of the Swedish government during the pandemic, it would have been possible for the government to bypass the constitutional obstacles if the government would have decided to enforce a more centralised strategy for managing the pandemic (SOU, 2022).

In Finland, the cabinet, together with the president, decided on the temporary activation of certain parts of the Emergency Powers Act (Government of Finland, 2011), which transferred considerable decision-making responsibilities to the cabinet and enabled, for example, stronger restrictions of citizen rights than would have otherwise been in place (Safety Investigation Authority of Finland, 2021; Saunes et al., 2022). The Emergency Powers Act was in use March–June 2020 and then again for a period of less than two months in March–April 2021 (Parliament of Finland, 2022). The Emergency Powers Act equipped the cabinet with authority it does not normally have, for example, to intervene in the activities of healthcare authorities and schools. Without the Emergency Powers Act, the possibilities of the government to steer the activities of autonomous authorities are very limited outside the normal steering through budgets and legislation, which is typical for the East Nordic model of governance (Ahlbäck & Wockelberg, 2016).

It is important to notice that the seemingly large differences between the Finnish and Swedish Covid-19 policies do not apply in a non-emergency setting. Without the Emergency Powers Act in place, the implementation of Covid-19 policies in Finland relies on a decentralised model, with the municipalities and the regional state authorities as the key players. The Finnish model is, to a large degree, equivalent to how Sweden organises its work against infectious diseases (Saunes et al., 2022).

Implementing Covid-19 policies in a multilevel healthcare system

A comparative overview of the Nordic healthcare systems

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic affected all societal branches, healthcare systems played a crucial role in the implementation of government guidelines. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic revealed both strengths and weaknesses of the healthcare systems in most countries. For example, in Sweden, the independent position of municipalities and regions in the implementation

of national health policies provoked extensive debate, since the setting with numerous independent actors was thought to slow down implementation and create confusion (SOU, 2022). Healthcare systems are multilevel and multi-actor settings and provide a good illustration of the complex interconnections between the levels of government in a modern state (Kuhlmann & Francke, 2022; Saunes et al., 2022). It is, therefore, relevant to compare the Nordic healthcare systems and to analyse the division of responsibilities between national and subnational authorities.

In Iceland, the health system as a whole is a national responsibility (Magnussen et al., 2009; Saunes et al., 2022). To provide healthcare services to the population, Iceland has seven healthcare districts, each with one or more healthcare institutions operating to provide general services, such as primary healthcare. The Directorate of Health of Iceland [Embætti landlæknis] assumes the national responsibility for the control and prevention of communicable diseases (Government of Iceland, 1997). The chief physicians of each healthcare district are responsible for health security and measures against communicable diseases in their own area (Saunes et al., 2022).

The Danish and Norwegian systems can be described as semi-national or semi-decentralised (Magnussen et al., 2009; Saunes et al., 2022). Responsibilities for day-to-day activities within the healthcare sector are shared between municipalities and regions (Denmark) or municipalities and state-owned health companies (Norway), still keeping a strong role for the state in the funding and coordination of the healthcare system. The Danish healthcare system involves national, regional, and local levels of government (Government of Denmark, 2019), with the state holding overall regulatory and supervisory functions in the healthcare sector. The five semi-autonomous regions in Denmark are primarily responsible for the hospitals, the general practitioners, and psychiatric care, while the 98 municipalities organise different forms of primary healthcare, especially with respect to prevention and rehabilitation, and are responsible for services for the elderly population. The Danish Communicable Diseases Act assigns responsibilities for prevention and treatment to ministries and government authorities, as well as to regions and municipalities (Government of Denmark, 2021). Responsibilities for coordinating practical actions, such as vaccinations, are assigned to the Danish Patient Security Authority, under the Ministry of Health. According to the Health Services Act (Government of Denmark, 2019), the Patient Security Authority is localised in connection with the decentral units of the healthcare system and is obliged to provide guidelines for municipalities and regions in their work against communicable diseases.

The Norwegian healthcare system is a shared responsibility between the 356 municipalities responsible for primary healthcare and care of elderly and disabled persons, and the four regional state-owned health companies responsible for specialised healthcare, including hospitals (Government of Norway,

2011). Municipalities and health companies have assigned cooperation in order to secure seamless care from the patient's point of view. Municipalities enjoy considerable autonomy in organising health and care services, including the use of private providers. The Norwegian Act of Communicable Diseases lists a total of nine local, regional, and national authorities, including municipalities and regional health companies, responsible for the control and prevention of communicable diseases (Government of Norway, 1994). The law gives the national health directorate the mandate to instruct the activities of municipalities and health companies if necessary to prevent or handle outbreaks of contagious diseases.

The Swedish and Finnish healthcare organisations are decentralised (Magnusson et al., 2009; Saunes et al., 2022). The Swedish regions and the Finnish municipalities in charge of healthcare services enjoy considerable autonomy in the organisation of services. The mandate for national authorities to involve themselves with the activities of local and regional health authorities is weak.

In Sweden, responsibilities for both primary and secondary healthcare rest with 21 regions (Government of Sweden, 2017), and the 290 municipalities have overall responsibility for the care of the elderly and people with disabilities; medical treatment for these groups is, however, the responsibility of the regions. Both regions and municipalities enjoy a large degree of autonomy within the frames defined in the national legislation. This autonomy includes the possibility to provide publicly financed health and care services through private service providers. According to the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act (Government of Sweden, 2004), the administrative responsibility for the management and control of infectious diseases rests with the regions and the national authority of public health. The act strongly emphasises the responsibility of the individual citizen to protect their own health.

At the time of the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, the Finnish healthcare system was decentralised and fragmented, with responsibilities for both primary and secondary healthcare resting with 293 municipalities and 20 intermunicipal hospital districts (Government of Finland, 2010). Financial responsibilities for the healthcare sector are divided between the municipalities and the state. A major reform is set to take effect in 2023, which will transfer the responsibility for all health and social services from the municipalities to 21 new directly elected and nationally funded regional authorities.

The Finnish Communicable Diseases Act (Government of Finland, 2016) assigns the hospital districts responsibility for developing regional diagnostics and treatment of communicable diseases, as well as for controlling and managing exceptional outbreaks. The municipalities are responsible for organising the control of communicable diseases within their area, as laid down in the Primary Health Care Act.

Formal and informal links between health authorities

Because of differences in their basic organisation of healthcare systems, the Nordic countries employ varying mechanisms to link the parts of the healthcare system together. In the decentralised systems in Finland and Sweden, various soft coordination mechanisms are put in place to strengthen the alignment between different actors in the system, in addition to what is prescribed by law. In Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, coordination is more institutionalised and includes hierarchical steering mechanisms and formal coordination commissions (Saunes et al., 2022).

The arm's-length relationship between the Swedish government and the country's regional health authorities resulted in the activation of a number of informal coordination tools. Negotiations and agreements between the national government and the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities (SALAR) are used as a mechanism to secure the implementation of national policies (Askim & Bergström, 2022; SOU, 2021). Furthermore, the national government appointed a specific national coordinator to oversee the implementation of the vaccine programme in the regions (Government of Sweden, 2021).

In Finland, new regional Covid-19 coordination groups were established after the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 in order to strengthen the alignment between the municipal and state authorities responsible for actions against communicable diseases (see, e.g., Turku University Hospital, 2022).

In Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, national authorities possess stronger mechanisms to coordinate and control the activities of individual regional or local authorities (Saunes et al., 2022). One significant example of such a mechanism is the formal role of the national Danish Patient Security Authority as a link between the different levels of the Danish healthcare system (Government of Denmark, 2019).

Table 2.2 sums up the main features of the Nordic healthcare systems with regard to the division of labour between national and subnational levels of government. Although each Nordic country has its own unique healthcare institutions, the architecture and the interconnections of the healthcare systems illustrate some of the same institutional differences between the Nordic countries, as observed earlier in this chapter.

Table 2.2 *Main features of Nordic healthcare systems, 2020*

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Responsibility for healthcare services	national and subnational	subnational	national	national and subnational	subnational
Responsible subnational authorities	5 regions; 98 municipalities	293 municipalities; 20 intermunicipal healthcare districts	7 health regions (not independent)	326 municipalities	21 regions; 290 municipalities
Coordination between national and subnational levels	formalised	weak, informal	strong, formal	formalised	weak, informal

Comments: The compilation is based on the healthcare legislation of each country. The description refers to the system in place at the time of the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020.

The interconnections between the national and subnational levels of the healthcare systems are stronger and more formalised in Denmark and Norway than in Sweden and Finland, while in Iceland, the healthcare system as a whole is a national responsibility. The observations reflect the basic differences between the East and the West Nordic systems with regard to the relationships between the governments and the public authorities. The autonomy of responsible regions in Sweden and municipalities in Finland is equivalently stronger than the autonomy of the corresponding authorities in the neighbouring countries, which links to earlier observations concerning the degree of autonomy of public authorities.

However, the division of labour between the local and regional subnational levels varies considerably between individual countries and is unconnected to administrative traditions. The public debate in Sweden about Covid-19 and evaluations of the national policies has especially highlighted the decentralisation of the Swedish healthcare system as well as the lack of access to medical expertise within municipal elderly care as potential sources of policy failure (SOU, 2020, 2021).

From a comparative perspective, responsibilities in the Swedish healthcare system are divided between fewer actors (21 regions) than in Denmark, Finland, and Norway, where both regional and local authorities organise healthcare services. In terms of the number of individual actors with formal responsibility for healthcare, Finland and Norway have the most fragmented systems and Iceland the most concentrated (Larsen et al., 2020; Magnussen et al., 2009). Local authorities play a more prominent role in the treatment and prevention of communicable diseases in Denmark, Finland, and Norway than in Sweden.

As Askim and Bergström (2022) conclude, the role of local government in the implementation and formulation of policy responses to Covid-19 has been less pronounced in Sweden than in Norway. This illustrates the complexity of the institutions and practices between countries and illustrates that differences in institutional design do not suffice to explain the choice of governance tools and their outcome.

Conclusion

Government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have provoked new interest in how institutions of governance function when facing a crisis. In the Nordics, the remarkable differences in how the five countries responded to the crisis in early 2020 has raised questions as to whether variations in policy choices are connected to the different administrative heritages in the eastern and western parts of the Nordics. The contrast between Sweden's reliance on soft policy measures and Denmark's rapid and centralised crisis management has especially puzzled observers (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). The aim of this chapter has been to present a brief comparative overview of the main similarities and differences of the Nordic politico-administrative systems and to discuss the implications of the comparative observation for the governments' responses during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to recognise that the picture is complex and that comparisons face the risk of over-simplification. The scope and complexity of the Covid-19 crisis has called for multiple responses from the national and local governments in the Nordics. The pandemic has affected society as a whole and, correspondingly, most policy sectors – from healthcare and education to transport, business, and foreign affairs. National evaluation reports indicate that policy sectors have responded somewhat differently to the crisis (Government of Norway, 2021; SOU, 2022; Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Safety Investigation Authority of Finland, 2021). Furthermore, the use of measures to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic have varied among the Nordics during the course of the crisis (Kuhlmann & Francke, 2022; Saunes et al., 2022).

To what extent did constitutional differences guide the policy decisions taken in the Nordic countries during the early stage of the pandemic? According to earlier research on Nordic administrative traditions, the five Nordic countries share a set of common values and institutions, including parliamentary democracy, a rule-of-law political culture, autonomous government agencies, and strong subnational government (Ladner et al., 2019; Lgreid, 2017). Although the modernisation of government has erased many former differences between the East and West Nordic administrative traditions, fundamental variation remains with regard to both the scope of action of individual ministers and the relationship between the government and the administration (Ahlbäck &

Wockelberg, 2016). The constitutional differences define the extent to which an individual minister is able to instruct the activities of the administration within their domain of action. Denmark stands out as the strongest exponent of the West Nordic model, where ministerial responsibility covers all activities within the departmental sector. The East Nordic model, on the contrary, grants government agencies freedom from direct political involvement: The possibility of the government and its ministers to instruct subordinate agencies outside the formal legal and budgetary steering framework is limited. Sweden stands out as the most prominent example of respecting the autonomy of government authorities (SOU, 2022; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2020; Wenander, 2019). The comparative overview of the Nordic healthcare systems demonstrates that similar mechanisms can be observed in the relationship between the national and subnational levels of the healthcare systems, with a more centralised model in Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, and strongly decentralised systems in Finland and Sweden.

The analyses of the initial Covid-19 responses of the Nordic governments in the first half of 2020 indicate that constitutional differences matter, but that the use of extraordinary policy instruments can mitigate them. In their analysis of the importance of the divide between West and East Nordic administrative traditions in present-day Nordic politics, Ahlbäck and Wockelberg (2016) conclude that the most important divide is between Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries. This is also an accurate observation in terms of Covid-19 policies.

Throughout the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish strategy stayed closest to the ordinary governance model, with autonomous regions and government authorities (Askim & Bergström, 2022; Saunes et al., 2022; SOU, 2022). The four other Nordic countries implemented several centralising policy measures in March 2020. Some of these policies were implemented within the normal scope of action of political institutions – others were enhanced through extraordinary policy instruments. The West Nordic model of governance grants individual ministers' considerable room for manoeuvring, and the Danish Covid-19 policies provide the most prominent – and criticised – example of how this discretion can be utilised to achieve desired policy outcomes. Within the same constitutional model, Norway embarked on a path that, on one hand, centralised power with the national government, but on the other, included mechanisms to curb the use of that power (Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Government of Norway, 2021). In the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis, Finland, Iceland, and Norway activated their preparedness legislation in order to strengthen the competencies of the cabinets to make countrywide decisions (Saunes et al., 2022). The effects of the extraordinary policy instruments for the balance of power in society was especially strong in Finland, where the activation of the Emergency Powers Act in March 2020 resulted in extensive deviations from the ordinary decentralised model of government as competencies, for example,

to close down schools, were centralised with the national government. After the deactivation of the preparedness legislation, the organisation of Finnish policies to mitigate the pandemic returned to a model based on autonomous municipalities, health districts, and state authorities – that is, a model with strong commonalities with Sweden’s organisation of equivalent policies.

The history of Nordic Covid-19 policies is also a history of learning and ongoing reform. When the pandemic struck the Nordics in early 2020, the governments had to utilise the policy instruments at hand; not all of them were suitable to curb a global pandemic, but the outbreak launched immediate action to refine and reform the policy instruments (Saunes et al., 2022). Overall, this analysis shows that political decision-makers act within given constitutional and institutional frameworks. Institutional structures limit the range of choices available, but politicians always have a choice as to what degree they decide to utilise the available scope of action.

References

- Ahlbäck, Ö. S., & Wockelberg, H. (2016). Nordic administrative heritages and contemporary insitutional design. In G. Carsten, P. Lægreid, & L. H. Rykkja (Eds.), *Nordic administrative reforms: Lessons for public management* (pp. 57–78). Palgrave McMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56363-7>
- Askim, J., & Bergström, T. (2022). Between lockdown and calm down: Comparing the Covid-19 responses of Norway and Sweden. *Local Government Studies*, 48(2), 291–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1964477>
- Bergman, T. (2004). Sweden: From Separation of Power to Parliamentary Supremacy – and Back Again? In K. Strøm, W. C. Müller, & T. Bergman (Eds.), *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies* (pp. 594–619). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019829784X.001.0001>
- Bergman, T., Müller, W. C., Strøm, K., & Blomgren, M. (2004). Democratic delegation and accountability: Cross-national patterns. In K. Strøm, W. C. Müller, & T. Bergman (Eds.), *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies* (pp. 109–220). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019829784X.001.0001>
- Boin, A. & 't Hart, P. (2003). Public leadership in times of crisis: Mission impossible? *Public Administration Review*, 63(5), 544–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6210.00318>
- Bouckaert, G., Galli, D., Kuhlmann, S., Reiter, R., & Van Hecke, S. (2020). European coronationalism? A hot spot governing a pandemic crisis. *Public Administration Review*, 80(5), 765–773. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13242>
- Christensen, T., & Lægreid, P. (2020). Balancing governance capacity and legitimacy: How the Norwegian government handled the Covid-19 crisis as a high performer. *Public Administration Review*, 80(5), 774–779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13241>
- Christensen, T., Lægreid, P., & Rykkja, L. H. (2016). Organizing for crisis management: Building governance capacity and legitimacy. *Public Administration Review*, 76(6), 887–897. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12558>
- Danish Ministry of Environment and Food. (2020). *Redegørelse for forløbet vedrørende manglende hjemmel til at udvide den hidtidige indsats med aflivning af mink til hele landet* [Statement of the process regarding the lack of authorization to expand the previous efforts with the killing of mink to the whole country]. <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20201/almdel/MOF/bilag/130/2284038.pdf>

- Government of Denmark. (2019). *Sundhedsloven [Healthcare act]*. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ta/2019/903>
- Government of Denmark. (2020). *Lov om ændring af lov om foranstaltninger mod smitsomme og andre overførbare sygdomme og forskellige andre love [Act amending the act on measures against infectious and other communicable diseases and various other laws]*. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=213843>
- Government of Denmark. (2021). *Lov om epidemier [Epidemics act]*. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ta/2021/285>
- Government of Finland. (2010). *Hälsö- och sjukvårdslag [Healthcare act]*. <https://www.finlex.fi/sv/laki/ajantasa/2010/20101326>
- Government of Finland. (2011). *Beredskapslag [Emergency powers act]*. <https://www.finlex.fi/sv/laki/ajantasa/2011/20111552>
- Government of Finland. (2016). *Lag om smittsamma sjukdomar [Communicable diseases act]*. <https://www.finlex.fi/sv/laki/ajantasa/2016/20161227>
- Government of Iceland. (1997). Act on health security and communicable diseases, No. 19/1997.
- Government of Iceland. (2020, March 21). *Icelandic government announces 1.6bn USD response package to the Covid-19 crisis*. <https://www.government.is/news/article/?newsid=afa0d410-6b79-11ea-9462-005056bc4d74>
- Government of Norway. (1994). *Lov om vern mot smittsomme sykdommer [Act on protection against infectious diseases]*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1994-08-05-55>
- Government of Norway. (2011). *Lov om kommunale helse- og omsorgstjenester m.m. [Act on municipal health and care services, etc.]*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2011-06-24-30>
- Government of Norway. (2020). *Midlertidig lov om forskriftshjemmel for å avhjelpe konsekvenser av utbrudd av Covid-19 mv. [Temporary act on regulatory authority to counteract the consequences of the covid-19 outbreak, etc.]*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/lov/2020-03-27-17>
- Government of Norway. (2021). NOU 2021:6 *Myndighetenes håndtering av koronapandemien — Rapport fra Koronakommisjonen [The authorities' handling of the corona pandemic – Report from the corona commission]*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2021-6/id2844388?ch=1>
- Government of Sweden. (2004). *Smittskyddslag [Communicable diseases act]*. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/smittskyddslag-2004168_sfs-2004-168
- Government of Sweden. (2017). *Hälsö- och sjukvårdslag 2017:30 [Healthcare act 2017:30]*. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/halso-och-sjukvardslag_sfs-2017-30
- Government of Sweden. (2019). *Regeringens proposition 2019/20:155 Tillfälliga bemyndiganden i smittskyddslagen med anledning av det virus som orsakar covid-19 [Government bill 2019/20:155 temporary authorizations in the infection control act due to the virus that causes Covid-19]*. https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/proposition/tillfalliga-bemyndiganden-i-smittskyddslagen-med_H703155
- Government of Sweden. (2021). *Regeringens åtgärdsplan för införande av smittskyddsåtgärder [Government's action plan for the introduction of infection control measures]*. <https://www.regeringen.se/4ae7b3/contentassets/fe4de45c162544819deb7a1c52a24364/regeringens-atgardsplan-for-inforande-av-smittskyddsatgarder-2.pdf>
- Greve C., Lægrend P., & Rykkja L. (2016). *Nordic administrative reforms: Lessons for public management*. Palgrave MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56363-7>
- John P. (2011). *Making policy work*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830789>
- Kristjánsson, S. (2004). Iceland: A parliamentary democracy with a semi-presidential constitution. In K. Strøm, W. C. Müller, & T. Bergman (Eds.), *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies* (pp. 399–417). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019829784X.001.0001>
- Kuhlmann, S., & Francke J. (2022). Multi-level responses to Covid-19: Crisis coordination in Germany from an intergovernmental perspective. *Local Government Studies*, 48(2), 312–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1904398>

- Ladner, A., Keuffer, N., Baldersheim, H., Hlepas, N., Swianiewicz, P., Steyvers, K., & Navarro, C. (2019). *Patterns of local autonomy in Europe*. Springer International. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95642-8>
- Larsen, A. T., Klausen, M. B., & Højgaard, B. (2020). *Primary health care in the Nordic countries: Comparative analysis and identification of challenges*. Vive, The Danish Center for Social Science Research. <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/15439/4892199>
- Lægreid P. (2017). Nordic administrative traditions. In P. Nedergaard, & A. Wivel (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Scandinavian politics* (pp. 80–91). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315695716>
- Magnussen, J., Vrangbæk, K., & Saltman, R. D. (Eds.). (2009). *Nordic health care systems: Recent reforms and current policy challenges*. World Health Organization. https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/98417/E93429.pdf
- March, J., & Olsen, J. P. (2011). The logic of appropriateness. In R. Goodin, M. Moran, & M. Rein (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political science* (pp. 689–708). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548453.003.0034>
- Parliament of Denmark. (2021). *Håndteringen af covid-19 i foråret 2020 – Rapport afgivet af den af Folketingets Udvalg for Forretningsordenen nedsatte udredningsgruppe vedr. håndteringen af covid-19 [Report from the expert commission investigating the actions of the Danish authorities with regard to Covid-19 in the spring of 2020]*. <https://www.ft.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/publikationer/haandtering-af-covid19-foraar-2020.ashx>
- Parliament of Finland. (2022). *Beredskapslagen under coronatiden [Emergency powers act during the Covid-19 pandemic]*. https://www.eduskunta.fi/SV/naineduskuntatoimii/kirjasto/aineistot/kotimainen_oikeus/LATI/Sidor/valmiuslain-kaytoonottaminen-koronavirustilanteessa.aspx
- Peters, G. (2018). *Policy problems and policy design*. Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786431356>
- Safety Investigation Authority of Finland. (2021). *Coronaepidemins första fas i Finland år 2020 [The first phase of the corona epidemic in Finland in 2020]*. https://turvallisuustutkinta.fi/material/collections/20210630071302/7RRV2vKL3/P2020-01_Corona_SV.pdf
- Saunes, I. S., Vrangbæk, K., Byrkjeflot, H., Jervelund, S. S., Birk, H. O., Tynkkynen, L. K., Keskimäki, I., Sigurgeirsdóttir, S., Janlöv, N., Ramsberg, J., Hernández-Quevedo, C., Merkur, S., Sagan, A., & Karanikolos, M. (2022). Nordic responses to Covid-19: Governance and policy measures in the early phases of the pandemic. *Health Policy*, 126(5), 418–426. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2021.08.011>
- SOU (Swedish Government Official Reports). (2020). *Äldreomsorgen under pandemin: Delbetänkande 1 från Coronakommissionen [Elderly care during the pandemic: Partial report 1 from the corona commission]*. https://coronakommissionen.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/sou_2020_80_aldreomsorgen-under-pandemin_webb.pdf
- SOU (Swedish Government Official Reports). (2021). *Sverige under pandemin: Delbetänkande 2 från Coronakommissionen [Sweden during the pandemic: Interim report 2 from the corona commission]*. <https://coronakommissionen.com/publikationer/delbetankande-2/>
- SOU (Swedish Government Official Reports). (2022). *Sverige under pandemin: Volym 2 förutsättningar, vägval och utvärdering [Sweden during the pandemic: Volume 2 prerequisites, path choice and evaluation]*. https://coronakommissionen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/sverige-under-pandemin-volym-2_webb-slutbetankande.pdf
- Swedish Agency for Public Management. (2020). *Förvaltningsmodellen under coronapandemin [Swedish public administration model during the pandemic]*. <https://www.statskontoret.se/siteassets/rapporter-pdf/2020/oos41.pdf>
- Turku University Hospital. (2022). *Coronavirus epidemic in 2022*. <https://www.vsshp.fi/en/Pages/Coronavirusepidemic-2020.aspx>
- Wenander, H. (2016). Rättsliga ramar för styrning av förvaltningen i Danmark och Sverige [The legal framework for steering of the administration in Denmark and Sweden]. *Nordisk Administrativ Tidsskrift*, 93(1), 57–74. https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/files/8207752/Wenander_R_ttsliga_ramar_f_r_styrning_av_f_rvaltningen_i_Danmark_och_Sverige_NAT_2016_s_57_74.pdf

Wenander, H. (2019). Den statliga förvaltningens konstitutionella ställning i Sverige och Finland – pragmatism och principer [The constitutional status of the state administration in Sweden and Finland – pragmatism and principles]. *Tidskrift utgiven av Juridiska Föreningen i Finland*, (3), 103–150. https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/portalfiles/portal/69390495/Wenander_Den_statliga_f_rvaltningens_konstitutionella_st_llning_i_Sverige_och_Finland_pragmatism_och_principer_JFT_2019_s._103_150.pdf

Section II

Communicating the Covid-19 pandemic

A comparison of government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Lars Nord^I & Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell^{II}

^IDepartment of Media and Communication Science, Mid Sweden University

^{II}Department of Political Science and Law, Swedish Defence University

Abstract

In this chapter, we utilise a framing analysis to compare Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish government communication during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. The results show that the perceptions of the seriousness of the crisis and the expected challenges facing Scandinavian societies were shared by all three governments, but they framed their communications slightly differently. Though based on common perceptions of an extraordinary threat to society and efforts to demonstrate national solidarity, a key component of the differences between the three Scandinavian prime ministers' framing of the crisis was related to the issue of political control: One prime minister had come to office with the intention of assuming full political control in crisis situations, another framed management of the crisis in accordance with the delegation of power, and the third sought balance between expert agencies and political control through transparency and openness.

Keywords: government frames, crisis communication, crisis exploitation, Scandinavian countries, Covid-19 communication strategies

Introduction

In this chapter, we compare the communication strategies of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish governments and examine the differences and similarities across these states. Theoretically, we depart from the notion of crisis as both a

Nord, L., & Olsson Gardell, E.-K. (2023). Communicating the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparison of government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 53–71). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-3>

threat and an opportunity, where the framing of crisis severity paves the way for political action (or inaction). From this perspective, a political crisis can be understood as a calculated act in which successful actors manage to exploit the situation to their advantage by demonstrating action, strengthening credibility, and pushing through new policies (Boin et al., 2009). Inspired by previous research in the field of political crisis communication, we apply a framing analysis (see Nord & Olsson, 2013). In accordance with this framework, we explore the Scandinavian governments' communications through three frames: responsibility, managerial, and morality. The responsibility frame deals with questions related to the origin of the crisis, its severity, and solutions for ending the crisis. The managerial frame deals with an actor's skill to promote their own management of the crisis. Finally, the morality frame is about morals, emotions, and values.

Our aim with this chapter is to compare government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 to answer the following research question:

RQ1. How were the responsibility, managerial, and morality frames addressed in government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Political leaders' crisis communications

To study the government communication of Covid-19 in the Scandinavian countries, we applied a framework developed to understand how leaders make communicative use of crisis characteristics through the application of various frames. The power of frames lies in their ability to categorise and connect pieces of information, and in so doing, reduce complexity to single coherent stories that have ideological and political implications (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992). It is through frames that actors fight over the legitimacy of values and principles (Canel, 2012; Entman, 2003; Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). Frames are particularly powerful when an issue emerges on the agenda quickly and in an unpredicted way, like when a new crisis strikes society. In order for leaders to succeed in their crisis communication efforts, they must be able to create a convincing story that explains what has happened, why it has happened, the repercussions, how it can be resolved, who can be relied on, and who is to blame (Boin et al., 2016). In short, the causes of a crisis can be framed as exogenous (located outside the realm of the responsible actors) or endogenous (responsible actors are the source of the problem). An exogenous framing provides political actors with more room to maneuver and more control over the communication process (Boin et al., 2009). When crises are framed as endogenous, communica-

tion strategies become focused on blame avoidance and defending reputations. How the causes of a crisis are framed is therefore, at least to a certain extent, constrained by the nature of that crisis. At the same time, the causes of the crisis are also an important aspect of the contested framing.

Crisis communication efforts often end up in various “blame games” (Hood, 2011), as there is much to be gained for actors who succeed in framing the crisis to their own advantage. According to Brändström and Kuipers (2003), blame games are characterised by actors’ strategic choices based on three dimensions: severity (how bad the situation is, or was), agency (how it might have happened), and responsibility (who is to be held accountable). Blame games are in themselves a sign that an issue has been politicised. The level of politicisation differs based on the characteristics of the crisis and on the actors’ ambition and resources. For example, previous research tells us that crises involving military threats from an outside enemy or terrorist situations tend to be characterised by societal and political rally-around-the-flag syndromes, and are accordingly depoliticised (Boin et al., 2016; Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015). From a journalistic perspective, these events (most often wars) tend to be characterised by the suppression of core journalistic norms, such as objectivity and factuality (Katz & Liebes, 2007; Reynolds & Barnett, 2003; Olsson & Nord, 2015). Other types of events may be more open to interpretation. It should also be noted that crisis events tend to change character over time. What started as an event framed as exogenous may well become an endogenous crisis over time as actors, for example, make various managerial mistakes or become embroiled in scandals related to the crisis at hand.

The focus on blame rhetoric departs from a notion of crises as threats. However, crises represent not only a threat, but also an opportunity where successful outcomes boost political parties, their preferred policy options, and individual actors (Boin et al., 2009). Defensive strategies should therefore be complemented by more active frames related to managerial competence and morality. Moreover, frames must be coherent and mutually reinforcing. They should also pay attention to and be aligned with media logic dynamics (Nord & Olsson, 2013).

This study applies a framework previously developed by Nord and Olsson (2013), according to which successful crisis communication consists of a coherent mix of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames. Responsibility is a widely applied frame in news media and crisis communication settings and has been directed at coverage that deals with evaluations of crisis management response, focused on the media’s allocation of blame (Coombs, 2004; Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). The responsibility frame deals with questions related to the origin of the crisis, its severity, and the possible solutions for ending the crisis. The most difficult communication challenges come when the crisis is framed as severe, and governmental actors are con-

sidered responsible for its occurrence. The managerial frame is related to the actor’s ability to promote their own handling of the crisis. Finally, the morality frame is about morals, emotions, and values. Morality frames derive their power from resonating with the underlying culture and moral assumptions in society and are therefore easily recognised and understood by the audience. Such frames make appeals beyond the single frame and the story at hand. A classic example is the David-versus-Goliath narrative from the Bible as a way of describing the power differences between actors and creating sympathy for the one portrayed as David.

Method and material

In order to study the use of frames, we collected additional data from government websites. The texts of all public speeches, press releases, and extracts from press conferences published during March–June 2020 that expressed government views on the Covid-19 crisis were included in the analysis. Data were collected from three distinct types of websites in all three countries: those related to the government in general, to the prime minister’s office, and to the ministry responsible for public health. The websites analysed are listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 *Analysed government communication websites*

	Government	Prime Minister’s Office	Ministry of Health/ Social Affairs
Denmark	www.regeringen.dk	www.stm.dk	www.sum.dk
Norway	www.regjeringen.no	www.regjeringen.no/smk	www.regjeringen.no/hod
Sweden	www.regeringen.se	www.regeringen.se/stats-radsberedningen	www.regeringen.se/socialdepartementet

Comments: Material from 1 March–1 June 2020 was included in the analysis. The websites were searched by the authors in August–September 2021.

Only public and officially released statements by members of the government were considered. The three websites selected for each country were assumed to be the most central for finding government framing of the Covid-19 pandemic, while other ministry websites were generally more focused on the practical consequences of the pandemic related to distinct policy areas. The quotes referred to in this chapter are illustrative examples of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames promoted by government members in the three countries during the analysed time period. We have translated the quotes provided in this chapter; they are not officially authorised English translations.

The empirical sections below discuss the differences and similarities among the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish governments. The first section compares the contexts of governmental communications in terms of action and response to the development of the Covid-19 pandemic. The second section compares governments' use of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames when addressing the public about the crisis.

Government communications in context

As is normally the case in stressful situations, the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 resulted in increased support for the political parties in government, and especially for the Scandinavian prime ministers. Previous political conflicts were to a large extent replaced by political consensus between government and opposition parties in the face of this new and serious external threat to society. Politicians from diverging ideological camps “rallied around the flag”, that is, they came together in support of their respective governments. This happened in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in the initial phases of the crisis (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Hassing Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021). Scandinavian governments also used similar rhetorical leadership strategies: They appealed for solidarity, and as a result, they initially gained increased public support (Björkdahl et al., 2021). Later on, public support for governments in Scandinavia declined as a result of both unsuccessful crisis management and political ideology (Johansson et al., 2021). In the initial period of the crisis, however, governments generally strengthened their position politically, and their framing of crisis management was important to the domestic debate that followed as the Covid-19 virus spread (for an in-depth discussion of rally-around-the-flag effects in the Nordics during the pandemic, see Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

However, the role of the government also differed between the three Scandinavian countries. As has been noted by previous observers, the national health agency had a strong influence on pandemic response in Sweden, while the Danish and Norwegian responses appear to have been driven more distinctly from the offices of their respective prime ministers (Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Petridou, 2020; Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Nonetheless, even if crisis management and government actions varied between the three Scandinavian countries, responsible political leaders in all three countries were key players in communicating the crisis (for a discussion of how the different administrative traditions and models of governance in the Nordic countries influenced the different responses to the pandemic, see Sandberg, Chapter 2).

A distinctive feature of the Danish government in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis was the somewhat unexpectedly rapid action taken when the pandemic struck the country in late February 2020. It has been clearly documented by

both academic studies and political commentators that the government – and the Social Democrat prime minister, Mette Fredriksen, in particular – was quick to take control of the overall policy-making process, implementing measures that went beyond those recommended by the Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen], centralising power in the prime minister's office rather than other ministries and health agencies, and ordering the health authorities to work within the paradigm of precaution rather than proportionality, as the National Health Agency and its director, Sören Broström, had initially suggested (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). The strategy for handling the pandemic was regularly coordinated and defended in public by Fredriksen and Broström, but they did not always share the same perceptions of risk and the required action.

The leading role of the Danish prime minister in the public debate in early 2020 is confirmed by content analysis of news media coverage of key actors during the initial phase of the pandemic. The findings show that Fredriksen clearly dominated the news compared to Broström. Fredriksen's presence in the media reached the highest level in March 2020, when she announced extensive lockdown initiatives in several press conferences. Although media exposure later declined for both actors, the prime minister sustained three times the daily mentions of the health agency director (Rubin et al., 2021).

The leading role of Fredriksen and the strict restrictions implemented in Denmark were immediately strongly supported by other political parties in parliament, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Political opposition in the initial stages of the pandemic has been described as weak, not consolidated, and internally divided. The mutual understanding over the measures lasted for some time, but the rigorous nature of the regulations, the lockdown, and its consequences gradually generated more criticism from the opposition parties, which politicised the issue as time progressed (Hassing Nielsen, 2021).

One of the studies (Rubin & de Vries, 2020) reveals how leading Danish experts and politicians changed their sense-making in response to the outbreak of Covid-19. Interestingly, sense-making appeared to run along two parallel trajectories. In the early phase of the Danish Covid-19 response, it appears that sense-making was not in alignment, which contributed to a decision-making process in which mistrust and disputes were openly expressed. The study refers to an incident when the director of the Danish health agency denounced the closure of borders, stating that it was a political decision with no scientific merit and which lacked substantive evidence (Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Fredriksen responded that too many lives would be put at risk if the government based its decisions only on existing scientific evidence (Nielsen, 2020). She also questioned the Danish health agency's reliance on scientific evidence. This public exchange illustrates how the two main actors subscribed to very different sense-making at a critical juncture in the management of the pandemic (Rubin & de Vries, 2020).

Norwegian government communication displayed both similarities with and differences from the Danish case. As in Denmark, Norwegian political leaders played a dominant role in crisis management and communication and emphasised the precautionary principle when explaining restrictions and the shutdown of societal institutions and services. In contrast to Denmark, however, the leading politicians and public health authorities in Norway seemed to be more unified in their analyses of the developing situation and the most effective response to the pandemic.

In general, the political leadership in Norway worked closely with public officials and public health experts. The major decisions by the national government on how to respond to the pandemic were taken by the cabinet in close collaboration with the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. There were, however, some exceptions to this consensus around necessary action. For example, the Norwegian government initially implemented more radical initiatives than those recommended by the health agencies, such as closing schools and banning the use of vacation homes (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

One study of the Norwegian crisis communication concludes that it was generally characterised by clear, timely, and repeated messages. Communication was performed jointly by political leaders and expert agencies (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). However, this partnership did not result in equal visibility in the public debate in Norway. As in Denmark, the Conservative Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, was clearly the most visible person in the media as she announced the initial national social distancing initiatives (Rubin et al., 2021).

The Norwegian government decided on a paternalistic strategy, defining the situation as dramatic and maintaining that drastic measures would lead to a better long-term outcome. They suggested that the virus threatened Norwegians' way of life, that it might completely overwhelm the healthcare system, and the widespread existence of non-symptomatic cases, which came close to scaremongering. They also argued that "life and health" considerations and the precautionary principle should predominate (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

In Sweden, the government is ultimately responsible for national health policy, and thus for the strategy to combat Covid-19. The Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] deals with public health issues, and the government normally follows the advice of the expert authority, even if politicians have some discretion to take different decisions if they evaluate that the situation requires it. This more expert-driven public leadership is consistent with Sweden's administrative system, which guarantees central agencies a high degree of quasi-decisional autonomy (Christiansen et al., 2016; Petridou, 2020; Öberg & Wockelberg, 2016). However, some critical commentators have pointed out that this autonomy for agencies has not prevented the government from taking political initiatives in other policy areas (Calmfors, 2021).

Several observers have noted in the Swedish response to Covid-19 that the relative absence of political initiative in the process and a considerable degree of depoliticisation were remarkable aspects from a comparative Nordic perspective (Petridou, 2022). Ministers repeatedly indicated that they saw their role as acting on requests from the Public Health Agency, if and when such requests arrived. The director general of the Public Health Agency, Johan Carlson, declared in mid-March 2020 that his agency was “holding the baton, very clearly” (Andersson & Aylott, 2020: 6).

However, the Swedish government’s low-key role at the beginning of the pandemic was not directly exposed to public debate, as the issue was not politicised much at that time. This may have been partly due to a tradition of political ceasefires [*borgfred*] during severe national challenges. Non-politicisation might also have been promoted because of the unexpected support from the opposition for light-touch and largely voluntary restrictions. The far-right Sweden Democrats did urge the sort of response seen in other European countries, including school closures, and in early June, its party leader called on state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell to resign. However, even the Sweden Democrats kept a generally low profile in the initial phases of the crisis. Given this political background, it is reasonable to suggest that there was little appetite in the Social Democrat government to do anything other than delegate as much as possible in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (Andersson & Aylott, 2020).

Media content analysis from Sweden differs from what was noted in the other Scandinavian countries. In Sweden, the news media gave the most prominence to the state epidemiologist for much of 2020. He appears to have been more publicly visible a few weeks earlier than anyone in Denmark or Norway, but Sweden’s strongest surge in media coverage for both the prime minister and the state epidemiologist occurred one week later than surges in Denmark and Norway. Notably, however, the gaps between the Swedish media’s mentions of the prime minister and of the leading national expert were markedly shorter than Denmark’s or Norway’s. The prime minister eventually became more prominent than the state epidemiologist as Sweden implemented social distancing initiatives more similar in scope to Denmark’s and Norway’s during the second wave of the pandemic (Rubin et al., 2021).

Both the government and the Public Health Agency of Sweden declared their support for a strategy based on individual responsibility to counter Covid-19. The key elements of the strategy were citizens’ own actions and a sense of personal responsibility to limit the spread of infection (Lindström, 2021).

To conclude, governments in Denmark and Norway played a more dominant role in crisis communication, while the Swedish government took a more passive role in relation to the Public Health Agency. Diverging perceptions of the crisis emerged between governments and authorities in Denmark and Sweden, but not to the same extent in Norway. In the next section, we analyse govern-

ment communication in the three countries, with a particular focus on the use of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames.

Government communication frames

Our research question asks how responsibility, managerial, and morality frames were reflected in the Scandinavian governments' communications during the Covid-19 pandemic. When actors engage in crisis framing, the first and most crucial issue is to decide how to communicate the magnitude of the event (Boin et al., 2009). In order to maximise resources and provide support for controversial and innovative actions, the situation must be portrayed as extraordinarily difficult and troublesome. However, if governmental actors plan to maintain existing routines and protocols, crisis definitions do not have to be equally alarming.

The Scandinavian governments perceived the spread of Covid-19 in early 2020 in fairly similar ways in the beginning. Initially, the governments mainly reflected the views of their national public health agencies that this was a regional outbreak with limited risk of spreading beyond East and Southeast Asia. The topic was not yet at the top of the political agenda in Scandinavia, and government statements were rare. However, the situation changed dramatically when the virus was discovered in Europe, and especially in Italy, where high death rates and insufficient healthcare resources exposed the challenges that could be expected. On realising that no country could remain unaffected by the virus, leading politicians in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden then had to communicate the crisis to the public.

The countries each faced the same serious situation, and all three governments initially referred to extraordinary global developments and the sacrifices required by every citizen for a tough time ahead. The perception of crisis and the expected challenges facing Nordic societies were shared by the Scandinavian governments, but each framed its communication slightly differently.

In general, the Danish government and Prime Minister Fredriksen (Social Democrats) defended their actions and justified their positions by referring to the new and serious threat to Danish society, as well as the need to protect the citizenry at all costs. Fredriksen was especially influenced by the situation in Italy and other parts of Europe when she argued for a strict lockdown in Denmark. She recalled the reasons for her decisions in a later interview:

This was a matter of life and death. I can still see the images of the rest of Europe before my eyes. (DR Politik, 2020)

The Danish government characterised the pandemic as an “extraordinary situation” with great consequences for society. In a press conference, Fredriksson

addressed the situation in Italy and the lack of healthcare resources, pointing out that this was not a fantasy future scenario, but reality. She therefore asserted the necessity of applying the precautionary principle when dealing with the pandemic:

We should face up to the spread of the virus with more force. This can only be done if we do it together and if everyone is aware of the seriousness of the situation. We should stand side by side. We should take care of each other, but in different ways than we usually do. As Danes, we normally come together by being close to each other. Now, we must come together by keeping our distance from each other. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020)

The situation in Denmark was portrayed as extraordinary, which opened up possibilities for swift and strong action by the government. In Denmark, there was no sign of references to the responsibilities of actors outside the political sphere. On the contrary, the government took full responsibility for all actions taken and consequently addressed the need for political decision-makers to take the lead. The arguments generally emanated from morality frames that emphasised the need to protect the nation and its people from the disease and underlined the extraordinary character of the crisis. The drastic government decisions taken at the beginning of the pandemic were defended by moral reasoning as actions and efforts to avoid the disastrous situations already occurring in other countries, and to some extent also by government rhetoric referencing managerial frames on the competence and capability of political leaders. The precautionary principle was central for the government, even in phases of the crisis when national public health agencies made different evaluations of the situation.

Some observers noted that Fredriksen had addressed the need for the Prime Minister's Office to take the lead in the political process in relation to other ministries and public agencies long before the pandemic. Since she took office following the 2019 elections, she had argued that Denmark should be governed based on political principles and motivations rather than the evaluations and recommendations of experts in the public sector (Kragh, 2021). According to a parliamentary report, the Danish government also decided not to follow the advice from the public health agency in early 2020. The Danish Ministry of Health also lined up alongside the Prime Minister's Office, instead of backing its own agency (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). There is no doubt that the Danish government decided to react strongly because of the perceived seriousness of the situation, but also that the strong position taken by the Prime Minister's Office made the crisis management and communication strategy possible.

When the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg (Conservative), communicated to the public why it was imposing strict restrictions, she also referred

to the threats to citizens' life and health and underlined that the magnitude of the crisis demanded extraordinary actions:

We are today introducing the most intrusive measures on civil society in peace time. (Solberg, 2020a)

Solberg underlined the severity of the crisis by declaring that nobody in her generation had any previous experience of a similar challenge to society. In a televised speech to the nation, she also described the high level of trust in Norway as a great asset in dealing with the current crisis:

Generations before ours have created a society where we trust and respect each other. In good times and in bad, managing directors and industrial workers have shown up, side by side. We have built the welfare state together. When terror and disasters have hit us, we have faced the situation together. When freedom has been threatened, Norwegians have given everything for each other. This has given our country a head start that is more powerful than any weapon and more valuable than any oil fund: our trust in each other. (Solberg, 2020b)

It is also interesting to note how the Norwegian government made use of shared cultural meanings in their communicative response to the Covid-19 pandemic, where the word *dugnad* formed one of the meta-narratives (Moss & Sandbakken, 2021). *Dugnad* refers to collective local activities aimed at strengthening the common good and serves as a strong national symbol in Norway (for further examples of how the concept of *dugnad* was harnessed during the crisis, see Almlund et al., Chapter 6; Fiskvik et al., Chapter 11).

The uncertainty of the situation and the challenge of effective decision-making were also common themes in government communication, and the dilemmas governments were facing were sometimes openly and publicly addressed. The precautionary approach was further emphasised by Solberg in the following weeks, when she also admitted that not all the steps the government was taking were based on firm knowledge about the situation:

The political decisions of 12 March and the following days were taken under conditions of significant uncertainty. We have more knowledge today about the virus and its development, but there is still a high degree of uncertainty. We gave highest priority to life and health, and together we managed to stop the diffusion of the virus. However, time will tell if what we did was right, and if what we did wrong. (Solberg, 2020c)

The Norwegian government declared that politicians and the public health authorities were following developments closely and were well prepared to

handle the situation. However, members of the government, for example, the health and care services minister, Bent Høje, also addressed the dilemmas they faced in political decision-making:

We had plans to deal with pandemics long before Covid-19 appeared. We have plans to meet the specific challenges we are facing now; but regardless of how much and how well we plan, we cannot foresee every problem. Some have to be resolved gradually as and when they occur. (Høje, 2020a)

Høje also described the dilemmas politicians were facing in the decision-making process:

As politicians, we are sometimes tempted to propose stricter restrictions and actions in order to be perceived as decisive, or on the other hand to propose softer recommendations in order to mitigate the consequences for society and get a more positive reaction from citizens and companies. Both paths are wrong. It is important that decisions are based on the best advice we can get from our expert authorities. (Høje, 2020b)

Generally open about the complexity of the current situation, the Norwegian government often returned to the fact that it was difficult to make the right decisions under severe time pressure:

We are in a completely new situation. It has been important to act immediately. New regulations will not always be perfect. Mistakes and dissatisfaction may occur. They should be addressed later. (Solberg, 2020b)

The Norwegian government mostly communicated about the crisis using morality frames, and referring to the extraordinary threats to people's lives, public health, and the need to close down Norwegian society in order to effectively fight further spread of the virus. These frames were accompanied by reassuring statements about the government's capacity to deal with the situation. However, the managerial frames were often followed by total transparency about the difficult dilemmas politicians were facing when handling the situation.

The uncertainty about future developments was addressed by all three governments in early 2020, but different scenarios were presented. The Norwegian authorities estimated that around 25 per cent of the population could be infected by the virus, Denmark calculated 10 to 15 per cent, while the Public Health Agency of Sweden mentioned figures per million of the population. The Swedish government was not keen on speculating about this topic, as demonstrated by the minister for health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren:

I will not take responsibility for spreading the message that 25 per cent of the Swedish people could get the virus. (Hallengren, as cited in Eriksson, 2020)

In Sweden, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (Social Democrats) made an unusual televised speech to the nation in March 2020, in which he urged stoicism and warned of coming sacrifice but was unspecific about policy (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). He emphasised the need to limit the spread of infection, to avoid a situation in which many people became seriously ill at the same time, and to ensure that resources were available for healthcare, but the speech also revolved around the theme of individual responsibility.

We have general spread of the virus in Sweden. Lives, health, and jobs are threatened. More people will get sick and more people will have to say a final farewell to someone they love. The only way to handle this is to face the crisis as a society where everybody takes responsibility for themselves, for other people, and for our country. In this situation, everybody has a big personal responsibility. (Löfven, 2020a)

The government repeatedly claimed that it was doing whatever was necessary to save lives and protect people, but also added that the success of these efforts ultimately depended on the behaviour of Swedish citizens:

The novel coronavirus is testing our society. The government has recently announced various initiatives to protect people's lives, health and jobs. This crisis will continue for a long time. It will be tough; but our society is strong. If everyone takes responsibility, we will manage this crisis. (Löfven, 2020b)

As a global outlier for not imposing lockdowns and introducing only minimal restrictions, the Swedish government frequently referenced a deep-seated idea about Swedish exceptionalism, which tended to involve Sweden's welfare state and gender policy (Lindström, 2021; Nygren & Olofsson, 2020). In addition, the Swedish government expressed its preparedness for the dramatic situation when the number of cases rose significantly:

It is natural that many people are worried, but our society is well prepared. The expert authorities and our healthcare system are working very hard... we are in a marathon, we must prepare to live with this for a long time, but we will get through it and it is important that we do this together, helping each other. (Socialdemokraterna, 2020)

In the case of Sweden, the main impression given was that responsibility frames were most frequent when the Swedish government communicated with the public in the early stages of the pandemic. The notion of responsibility therefore took on another dimension in pandemic communication. Rather than being used as a way to characterise the locus of the crisis, in that responsibility for the crisis outbreak was based on external or internal sources, responsibility became

a key concept in discussing crisis mitigation. Responsibility in the context of mitigation was discussed on a scale ranging from individuals to government regulations and actions. Sweden took a much more individualised approach to crisis mitigation than Denmark or Norway. Though addressing the same basic intentions to save lives and protect people in an extraordinary situation, the Swedish government met the crisis with more voluntary recommendations and a greater focus on individual behaviour – morality frames were often embedded in a responsibility context. Responsibility frames were of course not absent from Danish and Norwegian governmental communications, but they played a fairly minor role, as stricter rules were implemented and people were obliged to follow those rules.

Concluding discussion

This study has shown that all the Scandinavian governments framed the crisis as serious and challenging, but there were interesting nuances. Both the Norwegian and the Danish prime ministers used strong rhetoric, as when Fredriksen described the situation as a matter of “life and death”, referring back to initial images of the pandemic from Italy and declared that Danish society was facing an “extraordinary situation”. Solberg also framed the situation as an extraordinary event and called it the toughest challenge to Norwegian society since World War II. No such strong phrases were used by Löfven in Sweden, who framed the situation as serious, but not as a crisis that called for massive governmental action. Instead, the solution to the crisis lay with the behaviour of individual citizens.

Another interesting feature is the notion of expertise and uncertainty. In both Denmark and Norway, the prime ministers made explicit reference to uncertainty in terms of the different assessments being made by scientists, agencies, and governments alike. In contrast to the Norwegian and Danish governments, the Swedish government made no reference to the precautionary principle, and there were no open disagreements between the government and the expert authority. It is open to question whether politics were being driven by experts, as seems likely in Sweden, or the experts were politically driven, as appeared to be the case in Denmark and Norway. Either way, the lack of transparency, discussion, and contestation probably made it harder for citizens to make their own assessments, or to understand the rationale behind political decisions. The Swedish Corona Commission concluded in its final report in February 2022 that “the government should have assumed clearer leadership of overall communication with the public” (SOU, 2022).

It is possible to conclude that the various government communications in Scandinavia displayed some common distinctive features in their communication

of the crisis, such as the need for national consolidation and exceptional political measures in order to handle the situation effectively. Other comparisons of the Scandinavian countries during the pandemic have also noted that governments used similar rhetorical leadership strategies, but their explanations and arguments for government actions had slightly different emphases (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). Public trust in government was higher in Denmark than in Sweden in early 2020, mainly because politicisation of the issue came later. Trust in the Danish and Swedish governments was consistent at this time, but there was a significant drop in Sweden between April and June, a period characterised by a public debate over the high death rates in the country (Hassing Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021).

The Danish government decided early on to take a leading role in dealing with – and following that, communicating about – the pandemic. The arguments for imposing strict regulations and initially closing Danish society down were to a large extent based on a politically calculated precautionary principle, rather than on proportionality considerations inspired by scientific evidence and previous epidemiological experience. Thus, the managerial frame was emphasised more in Denmark than in Sweden.

As noted in a previous study of the Norwegian case (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020), management of the pandemic was characterised by a high degree of cooperation between the government, agencies, and the political opposition, facilitated by a political climate generally characterised by high levels of trust. We also noted how morality frames of *dugnad* became a key resource in the government's communication in order to make people comply with rules and regulations.

The main social science explanations for the observed differences in government communication styles have so far to a large extent focused on political and administrative relations, and the fact that public authorities are more independent in Sweden. These are important differences, but hardly the only reasons why the Swedish government communicated and acted differently. An additional factor that has been suggested is a combination of weak political and strong bureaucratic leadership, where the government delegated policy-making to the public health agency (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). In addition, there has been a documented tendency in Swedish contingency planning – for both war and crises – to promote individual responsibility as opposed to state responsibility (Larsson, 2021).

It could be argued that governments during crises, sometimes for reasons of self-interest, focus on minimising political risks by avoiding dramatic or untested measures and decisions that might backfire later, for instance, during upcoming election campaigns. The decision to disassociate political actors as much as possible from a crisis response has been called strategic evasion, where the

basic idea is to escape individual responsibility and argue that other actors in the political-administrative system have the main responsibility (Boin et al., 2009).

One of the first steps of the Löfven administration upon coming to power in 2014 was to move the Crisis Management Coordination Secretariat away from the Prime Minister's Office. From a historical perspective, this action can be easily understood, as previous Swedish governments had had bad experiences of impulsive and uncoordinated crisis management (e.g., the *Estonia* in 1994, the Tsunami in December 2004, and the migration crisis of 2015).

To conclude, Scandinavian governments' framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 was based on common perceptions of an extraordinary threat to society and efforts to demonstrate national solidarity in the face of future uncertainties. The relative importance of the different frames used seems to be linked to government actions and strategies. The differences between the three countries in dealing with the crisis were linked to the actual progress of the pandemic in each country, and to the different policy-making models with regard to government-public administration relations. However, to some extent, a single actor's behaviour and decisions long before the outbreak of the pandemic may have additional explanatory value: One prime minister took power with the intention of strengthening the Prime Minister's Office in order to ensure full political control in future crisis situations; another entered the political arena with the idea of delegating power as much as possible in such situations; and the third tried to balance expert agencies and political control by emphasising transparency and openness. The different actions taken illustrate the fact that crises – to some extent – are perceived as opportunities by political leaders.

References

- Andersson, S., & Aylott, N. (2020). Sweden and coronavirus: Unexceptional exceptionalism. *Social Sciences*, 9(12), 232. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9120232>
- Baekgaard, M., Christensen, J., Madsen, J. K., & Mikkelsen, K. S. (2020). Rallying around the flag in times of Covid-19: Societal lockdown and trust in democratic institutions. *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 3(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.30636/jbpa.32.172>
- Björkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Villadsen, L., & Vigso, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidaritatem: Rhetorical leadership strategies in Scandinavia during Covid-19. In M. Lewis, E. Govender, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating Covid-19: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 163–184). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Boin, A., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511490880>
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., & McConnell, A. (2009). Crisis exploitation: Political and policy impacts of framing contests. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(1), 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>
- Brändström, A., & Kuipers, S. (2003). From 'normal incidents' to political crises: Understanding the selective politicization of policy failures. *Government and Opposition*, 38(3), 279–305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.t01-1-00016>
- Calmfors, L. (2021). *Mellan forskning och politik: 50 år av samhällsdebatt [Between research and politics: 50 years of societal debate]*. Ekerlids.

- Canel, M. J. (2012). Communicating strategically in the face of terrorism: The Spanish government's response to the 2004 Madrid bombing attacks. *Public Relations Review*, 38(2), 214–222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.11.012>
- Christiansen, P. M., Niklasson, B., & Öhberg, P. (2016). Does politics crowd out professional competence? The organisation of ministerial advice in Denmark and Sweden. *West European Politics*, 39(6), 1230–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1176368>
- Christensen, T., & Laegreid, P. (2020). Balancing governance capacity and legitimacy: How the Norwegian government handled the Covid-19 crisis as a high performer. *Public Administration Review*, 80(5), 774–779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13241>
- Coombs, W. T. (2004). Impact of past crises on current crisis communication: Insights from situational crisis communication theory. *Journal of Business Communication* (1973), 41(3), 265–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002194360426560>
- Danish Prime Minister's Office. (2020, March 11). Pressemøde om Covid-19 den 11. marts 2020 [Press conference on Covid-19 on 11 March 2020] [Press conference]. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>
- Djerf-Pierre, M., Ekström, M., Håkansson, N., & Johansson, B. (2014). The mediatization of political accountability: Politics, the news media logic and industrial crises in the 1980s and 2000s. *Journalism Studies*, 15(3), 321–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.889473>
- DR Politik. (2020, June 9). Mette Frederiksen på samråd: Der er ikke et skriftligt grundlag for nedlukning [Mette Frederiksen on consultation: There is no written basis for closure] [Interview Ritzau]. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/mette-frederiksen-paa-samraad-der-er-ikke-et-skriftligt-grundlag-nedlukning>
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Entman, R. M. (2003). Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11. *Political Communication*, 20(4), 415–432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390244176>
- Eriksson, G. (2020, March 7). Svenska Dagbladet, Göran Eriksson: Regeringen Löfven – och det värsta som kan hända [Svenska Dagbladet, Göran Eriksson: The Löfven government – and the worst that can happen]. *Svenska Dagbladet*, p. 9. <https://www.svd.se/a/8mkpdx/regeringen-lofven-och-det-varsta-som-kan-handa>
- Esaïasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2020). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from 'the Swedish experiment'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Falkheimer, J., & Olsson, E. K. (2015). Depoliticizing terror: The news framing of the terrorist attacks in Norway, 22 July 2011. *Media, War & Conflict*, 8(1), 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635214531109>
- Gamson, W. A., (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Garnett, J. L., & Kouzmin, A. (2007). Communicating throughout Katrina: Competing and complementary conceptual lenses on crisis communication. *Public Administration Review*, 67(s1), 171–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00826.x>
- Hassing Nielsen, J. (2021). Dronningegambit: Magtcentralisering, hård lockdown – og en bekymret befolkning, der dog bakkede op [The Queen's gambit: Centralization of power, strict lockdown and a concerned population, still backing up]. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 123(5), 161–178. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/23305/20728>
- Hassing Nielsen, J., & Lindvall, J. (2021). Trust in government in Sweden and Denmark during the Covid-19 epidemic. *West European Politics*, 44(5–6), 1180–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1909964>
- Hood, C. (2011). *The blame game: Spin, bureaucracy, and self-preservation in government*. Princeton University Press.
- Höje, B. (2020a, March 11). Redegjørelse om norske tiltak for å møte koronavirusutbruddet [Statement on Norwegian measures to deal with the coronavirus outbreak]. Ministry of Health and Welfare, Government of Norway. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/hod/taler-og-innlegg/minister/taler-av-helse-og-omsorgsminister-bent-/2020/redegjorelse-om-norske-tiltak-for-a-mote-koronavirusutbruddet/id2693018/>
- Höje, B. (2020b, March 10). Redegjørelse om norske tiltak for å møte koronavirusutbruddet [State-

- ment on Norwegian measures to deal with the coronavirus outbreak]. Ministry of Health and Welfare, Government of Norway. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/hod/taler-og-innlegg/minister/taler-av-helse-og-omsorgsminister-bent-2020/redegjorelse-om-norske-tiltak-for-a-mote-koronavirusutbruddet/id2693018/>
- Ihlen, Ø., & Thorbjørnsrud, K. (2014). Tears and framing contests: Public organizations countering critical and emotional stories. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 8(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2013.850695>
- Johansson, B., Hopman, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: when the Covid-19 pandemic becomes ‘normalized’. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(S1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- Katz, E., & Liebes, T. (2007). ‘No more peace!’: How disaster, terror and war have upstaged media events. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 157–166. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/44>
- Kragh, A. S. (2021). *Det første år* [The first years]. Politikens förlag.
- Larsson, O. L. (2021). The connections between crisis and war preparedness in Sweden. *Security dialogue*, 52(4), 306–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620936849>
- Lindström, M. (2021). Covid-19-pandemin och den svenska strategin: Epidemiologi, postmodernism och svensk exceptionalism [The Covid-19 pandemic and the Swedish strategy: Epidemiology, post modernism and Swedish exceptionalism]. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 123(5), 93–124. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/23299/20716>
- Löfven, S. (2020a, March 22). *Statsministerns tal till nationen* [The prime minister’s speech to the nation]. Socialdemokraterna. <https://www.socialdemokraternaisundbyberg.se/nyheter/statsministerns-tal-till-nationen>
- Löfven, S. (2020b, April 7). TV: Statsminister Stefan Löfven kallade till pressträff – se den här [TV: Prime Minister Stefan Löfven called a press conference - see it here]. *Dala-Demokratin*. <https://www.dalademokraten.se/2020-04-07/tv-statsminister-stefan-lofven-kallade-till-presstraff--se-den-har>
- Moss, S. M., & Sandbakken, E. M. (2021). ‘Everybody needs to do their part, so we can get this under control’: Reactions to the Norwegian government meta-narratives on Covid-19 measures. *Political Psychology*, 42(5), 881–898. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12727>
- Nielsen, N. (2020, April 1). Mette Frederiksen om Tiltag Uden Eksperternes Opbakning: Vi Mister for Mange Menneskeliv, Hvis vi Venter [Mette Frederiksen about acting without expert support: We will lose too many lives if we wait]. DR. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/mette-frederiksen-om-tiltag-uden-eksperternes-opbakning-vi-mister-mange-menneskeliv>
- Nygren, K. G., & Olofsson, A. (2020). Swedish exceptionalism, herd immunity and the welfare state: A media analysis of struggles over the nature and legitimacy of the Covid-19 pandemic strategy in Sweden. *Current Sociology Monograph*, 69(4), 529–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392121990025>
- Nord, L., & Olsson, E.-K. (2013). Frame, set, match! Towards a model of successful crisis rhetoric. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X1246420>
- Olsson, E.-K., & Nord, L. (2015). Paving the way for crisis exploitation: The role of journalistic styles and standards. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 16(3), 341–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849135190>
- Parliament of Denmark. (2021). *Håndteringen af Covid-19 i foråret 2020* [The management of Covid-19 during spring 2020]. <https://www.ft.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/publikationer/haandtering-af-covid19-foraar-2020.ashx>
- Petridou, E. (2020). Politics and administration in times of crisis: Explaining the Swedish response to the Covid-19 crisis. *European Policy Analysis*, 6(2), 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1095>
- Petridou, E. (2022). Following the public health agency’s guidelines: The Swedish approach to the Covid-19 pandemic. In N. Zahariadis, E. Petridou, T. Exadaktylois, & J. Sparf (Eds.), *Policy styles and trust in the age of pandemics: Global trends, national responses* (pp. 211–228). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1095>
- Reynolds, A., & Barnett, B. (2003). This just in... How national TV news handled the breaking ‘live’ coverage of September 11. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80(3), 689–703.

- <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699003080003>
- Rubin, O., Baekkeskov, E., & Öberg, P. (2021). A media visibility analysis of public leadership in Scandinavian responses to pandemics. *Policy Design and Practice*, 4(4), 534–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.1943830>
- Rubin, O., & de Vries, D. H. (2020). Diverging sensemaking frames during the initial phases of the Covid-19 outbreak in Denmark. *Policy Design and Practice*, 3(3), 277–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2020.1809809>
- Socialdemokraterna. (2020, March 11). Stefan Löfven (S) med anledning av Corona-viruset (20-03-11) [Stefan Löfven (S) on the occasion of the Corona virus (20-03-11)]. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A09tAefUfww>
- Solberg, E. (2020a, March 12). *Statsministerens innledning på pressekonferanse om nye tiltak mot koronasmitte* [The prime minister's introduction to the press conference on new measures against corona infection]. The Prime Minister's Office, Government of Norway. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/statsministerensinnledning-pa-pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-mot-koronasmitte/id2693335/>
- Solberg, E. (2020b, March 18). *Offisielt fra statsråd 18. mars 2020* [Official from the Minister of State 18 March 2020]. Government of Norway. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/offisielt-fra-statsrad-18.-mars-2020/id2694060/>
- Solberg, E. (2020c, March 24). Statsminister Erna Solbergs corona-oppdatering 24. Mars [Prime minister Erna Solberg's corona update on 24 March] [Video]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2753713658027736
- SOU (Swedish Government Official Reports). (2022). *Sverige under pandemin: Corona-kommisionens slutbetänkande* [Sweden during the pandemic: Final report from the Corona inquiry]. <https://coronakommissionen.com/publikationer/slutbetankande-sou-2022-10/>
- Öberg, S. A., & Wockelberg, H. (2016). Nordic administrative heritages and contemporary institutional design. In C. Greve, P. Læg Reid, & L. H. Rykkja (Eds.), *Nordic administrative reforms* (pp. 57–78). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56363-7_4

Strategic Covid-19 management in communicational practice

At the crossroads to remain open or not in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Joel Rasmussen,^I Øyvind Ihlen,^{II} & Jens E. Kjeldsen^{III}

^I School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden

^{II} Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway

^{III} Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This chapter examines how leading politicians and representatives of the public health authorities in Scandinavia attempted to create consent for their strategic choices to adopt or refrain from collective prevention measures, such as border and school closures, when such measures became relevant in the region in March 2020. It thus also concerns the broader strategic choices of the administrations in their attempts to curb or stop Covid-19. Based on a strategy-as-practice perspective, the chapter assumes that strategies are not artefacts that organisations only possess, but they are shaped, consolidated, and made public communicatively. The analysis of statements from press conferences shows how strategies are shaped communicatively through claims regarding a number of themes: economic consequences; the validity of epidemiological measures; secondary public health effects; the issue of risk severity (and in the Swedish case, natural immunity); and risk management history. The chapter also highlights the pragmatic arguments used and the dialogicality involved when a particular strategic choice is made viable through the presentation of alternatives. The chapter thus helps to bridge a gap between major response choices facing national and agency leaders on the one hand, and on the other, numerous micro-level communication efforts facilitated in part through press conferences.

Keywords: Covid-19 strategy, collective prevention, strategy-as-practice, Scandinavia, press conferences

Rasmussen, J., Ihlen, Ø., & Kjeldsen, J. E. (2023). Strategic Covid-19 management in communicational practice: At the crossroads to remain open or not in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 73–95). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-4>

Introduction

The initial management of Covid-19 around the world has ranged from full lockdown and curfews to more relaxed solutions with great confidence in communication and voluntary compliance. In Scandinavia, the initial responses ranged from a middle ground to perhaps the most liberal. Denmark – and to an even greater extent Norway – implemented collective risk prevention from 11 March onwards, when educational facilities, bars, restaurants, and gyms closed temporarily, large groups of employees were ordered to work from home, and travel was severely restricted. Sweden, with primarily voluntary measures, has been described as an outlier in comparison with its neighbours, and even more so in relation to even stricter government commands that included curfews (Pierre, 2020). While the World Health Organization urged countries to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus, the Swedish government and public health authorities chose to try to limit it, with “flattening the curve” as the defining metaphor (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; Ludvigsson, 2020).

The strategies of the Scandinavian countries and their consequences have been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g., Andersson & Aylott, 2020; Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Helsingen et al., 2020; Pierre, 2020; Warren et al., 2021). A recurring theme is a focus on Sweden’s political and legal system compared with the others, with an emphasis on its distinction between political power and the exercise of authority. To this is also added the country’s long history without war. But the literature also addresses great similarities between the Scandinavian countries, mentioning, for instance, analogous infection-control regulation (Laage-Thomsen & Frandsen, 2022). The constitution of each country establishes a fundamental right of freedom of movement, preventing some of the most severe measures against Covid-19. None of the Scandinavian countries has an enforceable law to impose a state of emergency like, for instance, Finland and most of Europe do. Scandinavian governments thus had to turn to their parliaments when in need of increased powers during the pandemic. Yet all three countries also have constitutional necessity rights, with a possible sanction in retrospect (see Cameron & Jonsson Cornell, 2020). We thus find that there is reason to take a closer look at government communication to discern explanatory logics, which may not directly have to do with the policy level, but which nevertheless sheds light on the countries’ Covid-19 management.

Given that those managing the pandemic response have needed to get people to follow both mandatory rules and advice, communication has played a vital role, something that is addressed in a few studies (e.g., Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Ihlen et al., 2022; Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; Rasmussen, 2022). Still, micro-focused discursive studies are rare, not least with regard to how such micro-practices and major events may be connected (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). Employing a micro-oriented, dialogical analysis (Linell, 1998), we aim

to examine in this chapter how leading politicians and representatives of the public health authorities in Scandinavia have attempted to create consent for their strategic choices to adopt or refrain from collective prevention measures, such as border and school closures, when such measures became relevant in the region in March 2020. We pose three research questions to address this aim, focusing specifically on national press conferences during March and April 2020:

- RQ1. What themes permeate arguments regarding collective protective measures against the transmission of Covid-19?
- RQ2. What kind of strategies in interaction are used to create consent?
- RQ3. What national similarities and differences appear between how choices are articulated regarding collective protection measures against Covid-19?

As discussed elsewhere in this edited volume, there are good reasons to compare the Scandinavian (and Nordic) countries, due to their similarities but also because they applied different strategies at the beginning of the pandemic. We take the strategy-as-practice perspective as a starting point for understanding strategy as communicational practice during the Covid-19 pandemic in Scandinavia.

Strategic risk management in communicational practice

A traditional perspective on strategy as a property of organisations, as something they possess, has been complemented by a perspective of strategy as practice since the 1990s. While a strategy may be formed into something momentarily fixed and taken for granted, this perspective is more concerned with ongoing, concrete practices that shape, fortify, and build consent for certain strategic choices. When attempting to build consent, actors call on others to align with certain ends and means to reach them, drawing on arguments and ideas, but without coercive force (Furman et al., 2019). When engaged in such processes, actors are considered as “doing” strategy, and the analytical focus is on the “nitty-gritty, local routines of practice” (Whittington, 1996: 732). The perspective thus differs from both a transmission view of communication and from a traditional, hierarchical view of strategy, which would more clearly separate the formation of strategy from the dissemination and implementation of it. Instead, a strategy-as-practice approach may encompass different phases of the reproduction of strategy, each seen as involving (at least) actions that may contribute to the legitimation and consolidation of certain path choices. In this chapter, we thus focus on strategy as a social, communicative practice consisting of routines, methods, and frameworks drawn upon in attempts to

coordinate groups towards effectively solving tasks. Strategy becomes visible when meaning is constructed and negotiated in communicative practices between interlocutors involved through different roles in the same project (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012).

Research that analyses the elements and significance of language use in strategy work has made visible the negotiation of various strategic choices and the establishment of positions of authority (Vaara, 2010). Studies have centred on externally focused events, such as keynote speeches (Wenzel & Koch, 2018), and internal strategy meetings involving top managers (Clarke et al., 2012). The empirical cases also tend to be characterised by varying degrees of structure and expected roles (Vaara, 2010), such as planned, moderated meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008) and more spontaneous discussions (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Thus, knowledge has been added about how meetings are managed to emphasise the viability of specific strategic choices. Actors draw on and reinforce a structure and role distribution of meetings that enables them to act as leaders and on rhetorical devices, shared values, assumptions, interests, and experiences, as well as statistics, to gather consent from a crowd.

In the context of risk management, some choices and considerations have to do with how uncertain, complex, and value-laden a risk is considered to be (Aven & Renn, 2020). In the case of Covid-19, it was uncertain how serious infections would be, exactly how the virus would spread, or how quickly. There is no established research or proven best practice to rely on in such uncertain situations. A predictive process is a gamble (Kjeldsen et al., 2021). The complexity may vary depending on whether causal mechanisms of the risk are understood, but also whether the risk can have different effects on the body of society that are not completely predictable. These risks are typically managed with either a risk-based (scientific) strategy or a precautionary strategy (Stirling, 2007). Industry and business representatives have advocated for a risk-based strategy, where calculations of severity and probabilities underly chosen measures. In a precaution-based strategy, and when an uncertain risk is to be managed, lack of science is not a valid argument for dismissing either a possible risk or possible protection (Government of Sweden, 1998). Risk governance research as well as environmental and citizen groups have long been in favour of a precaution-based strategy, with the argument that when society faces an uncertain risk, and knowledge is lacking, governing bodies must apply safety measures that protect against potentially high risk and severe damage (Aven & Renn, 2020; Klinke & Renn, 2002; Stirling, 2007).

Moreover, following Hilgartner (1992), we argue that the different ways of managing Covid-19 involved different ways of discursively defining sources of danger – risk objects – and their linkages and relations – networks of risk. Such a network of risk objects could begin with experts determining at what age young people spread infection, and then schoolchildren may be found to

pose a risk, the school considered a site of dissemination, as well as all travel there and from. Yet another risk object in this network would involve possible adverse effects on school performance and health if schools were to close. So, that which is dangerous is articulated in relation to entities' attributed protection value. Which risks to act upon and which interests to protect are not a given but are conditioned through the communication of fair judgement, ethics, laws, and politics in society. The epistemology we adopt thus centres on risk as a result of claims and relational conditions articulated in communicative processes, which does not rule out that risk also exists as a measurable artefact in science (see also Boholm & Corvellec, 2011).

Methodology

Press conferences emerged as the best available material to answer our research questions, since they present opportunities to analyse attempts at building consent for strategic choices. They form strategic arenas where politicians and agencies can communicate without journalistic editing. Presenters turn to the press but, especially during a major crisis, also to the wider public (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Given our interest in the communication of early strategic choices regarding collective restrictions, the data collection was limited to March–April 2020.

Transcripts of the press conferences of the Swedish government and the Public Health Agency of Sweden were analysed first by the lead author, Joel Rasmussen. The exploration of this material drew on dialogical analysis (Linell, 1998), which has previously been applied in the analysis of risk communication (Rasmussen & Kroon, 2012). The analysis began inductively with open coding of thematic fields, including recurring similarities and differences in the material. Then, the resulting themes from the analysis of Swedish material were compared with press conferences from Norway and Denmark. Characteristic and analytically important extracts from the three countries were transcribed and translated into English. Then, following Linell (1998), more detailed and language-sensitive examination followed. Thus, we sought to identify what kind of communicative project (Linell, 1998) the communication efforts were influenced by and oriented towards. For a representative in one country, it may be a matter of making a shutdown comprehensible or, in another country, making a policy of open borders and open establishments seem like the best option. We are thus referring to communicative projects that are managed in interpersonal communication. They can be short- or long-term, as well as be linked to other communicative projects (Linell, 1998). Importantly, politicians and public health authorities might have somewhat different communicative projects. In Norway, for instance, politicians were arguing for stronger meas-

ures than those initially recommended by the Norwegian Institute for Public Health. Hence, given their role as public servants, the communicative project of representatives of the latter would have to rationalise why they supported the measures (Tømmerbakke, 2020).

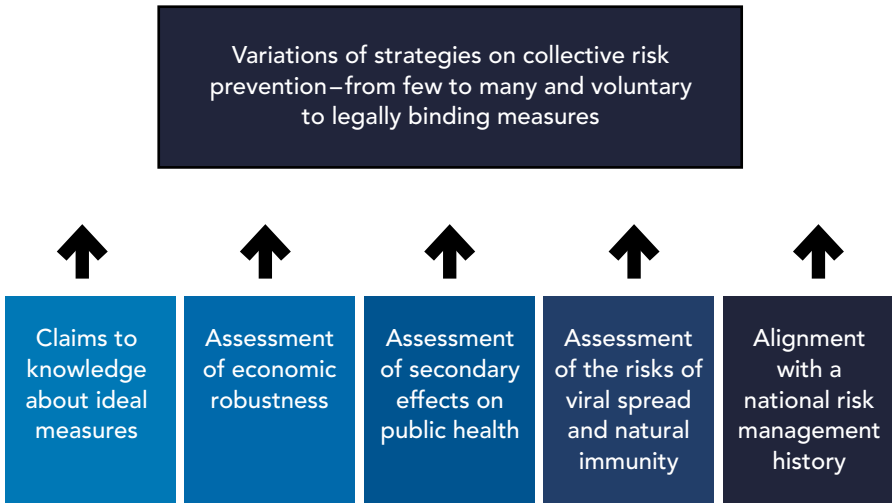
Furthermore, we examined how actors tried to handle the communicative projects they became involved in through communicative strategies, a concept that refers to conscious or less conscious discursive and contextual resources that are drawn upon to assert the viability of a particular position or action (Linell, 1998). Such communicative strategies may consist of actors drawing on established knowledge of the issue, expressing empathy, stakeholders' views, pronouncing the gravity of the situation or the responsibility of others, drawing on a rich tradition, or applying rhetorical manoeuvres such as maximising or minimising risk. When relevant, we also paid attention to divergent communicative projects, or a communicative dilemma, which features two or more incompatible goals or interests, so that the actor is forced to choose the best alternative or seek a compromise.

In summary, our analysis demonstrates some of the significant means of creating consent and the dialogicality involved. Dialogicality, Linell (1998) has explained, implies that actors do not communicate in isolation but by drawing on elements in the immediate and wider context, such as actual or imagined others and different perspectives that then play a role in the meaning they create.

Results

In the following, we seek to unpack five distinct themes drawn upon in government communication in Scandinavia when the issue of collective prevention measures was managed. The themes are condensed in Figure 4.1 and described in more detail in each of the following sections of the analysis, together with several discursive moves that they encompass.

Figure 4.1 Themes spanning communicative efforts on collective prevention choices



Varying claims to knowledge about ideal measures

In the case of Sweden, the communicative project that representatives shape and orient themselves towards is to make coherent and intelligible the choice to not follow the course taken by other countries. One of the prominent Swedish communicative strategies for completing this communicative project was to draw on the widespread belief that action must be backed by evidence (Lassnigg, 2014; Timmermans & Mauck, 2005) and claim that their choices were evidence-based. Such claims regarding knowledge of ideal measures were expressed on 10 March 2020 at the Swedish government’s press conference. A journalist mentioned that Italy and Sweden’s neighbouring countries were restricting public events and asked: “Are there any similar plans, here, to reduce the spread of infection?” whereby the prime minister answered:

The public health authorities have said that we must be prepared for that, and so has the government. But it is not certain that it is... eh... it depends on what type of event it is. It is not certain that it is dangerous just because there are a thousand people. It can be dangerous if there are fifty people if you are close enough to each other. We agreed in today’s video conference between the EU countries that we should coordinate this type of action. And we should base those decisions on what the experts say and what is scientifically proven and evidence... evidence-proven so to speak. It is the starting point for all types of decisions. But we will not shy away from making tough decisions if necessary. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020a)

The Swedish prime minister invoked a praxis of decision-making based on science and evidence, which implies, dialogically, the position that restrictions may be the opposite of rational action. But he also began by partially conceding the journalist's implied critique by strategically invoking intentions to enact restrictions, if necessary, both at the beginning and the end of the statement. He then adjusted to countering it by introducing a requirement to be "certain" regarding the effectiveness of safety measures which, it is argued, cannot be guaranteed for different group sizes in different contexts. Then he presented a requirement for evidence-based measures. A possible dilemma, however, was that Sweden at the time had not introduced *any* restrictions on group gatherings, which means that a valid argument would include evidence that rejects the effectiveness of restrictions on any group size. Another inherent dilemma consists of a contradiction – how one should act on risk-specific evidence when the risk is novel and uncertain (see also Klinke & Renn, 2002; Stirling, 2007).

It is notable that the Swedish prime minister began by stating that "the public health authorities have prepared for this", and then went on to say, "and so has the government", thereby discursively placing the government after the health authorities. In comparison to this, the Danish prime minister and government representatives generally put themselves discursively as the leading agents. In the press conference initiating the Danish lockdown on 11 March 2020, for instance, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said:

It is our clear conviction that we should act today rather than regret tomorrow. We need to act where it counts. Where the infection spread most. And that's where many people gather – daycare institutions, schools, educational institutions, leisure activities, events, public transport. And therefore, it is the authorities' recommendation that we shut down all necessary activity in those areas for some time. In other words, we apply a precautionary principle. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020a)

Frederiksen explicitly stated that the government applied a precautionary principle, and the preceding rhetoric demonstrates that it is her and her government, as the leading agents, that decide and carry out the decisions. The decision was based on "our clear conviction" rather than definite medical evidence, and the following specifications were political more than scientific. When the prime minister said that it is "the authorities' recommendation" to shut down, she didn't say "the health authorities' recommendation", but also avoided saying "the government's recommendation" or "I recommend". Thus, the "we" that applies the "precautionary principle" is the government, only implicitly involving the health authorities.

This becomes more evident in the following sentences. Only after putting herself and the government forward as active political agents did the Danish prime minister, briefly, turn to the "health professional infection analysis".

Immediately, she returned to a rhetorical and political constitution of who Danes are and how they ought to act during the crisis:

The health professional infection analysis is that there is one thing that works against the infection. And that is that we humans do not interact with each other too much. We need to stand together and we need to take care of each other. But we have to do it in a different way than we usually do. As Danes, we tend to seek community by being close to each other. Now we must stand together, by keeping our distance from each other. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020a)

The rhetoric of the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, was similar. In the excerpt below, she too began by presenting the issue as seen from the actions taken politically. However, she allowed more room for the presence and perspective of the health authorities. Measures were based on political decisions; the government had acted, and – after the implementation of the measures – “new calculations” showed these measures were right:

The government has today discussed the measures we implemented on March 12th. We have done this according to new calculations from the health authorities. The calculations show, first, that it was right to implement the measures. Before the strict measures, each corona-infected person probably infected an average of 2.4 others. If the spread had continued like this, many people would have become ill in a short time. (Government of Norway, 2020a)

After having implemented extensive collective restrictions, the communicative project that here seems to involve the Norwegian prime minister was to justify the decisions and call on others to align with the chosen path. We see that this was done by her crafting a strong epistemic position, by acknowledging expertise (“calculations from the health authorities”), and endorsing positive evaluation, drawing on figures showing a negative development that had been reversed. Thus, while all three prime ministers framed collaborative work and claimed strong epistemic positions by asserting science-based decisions or measurable results, there was different emphasis. In the Swedish case, the prime minister and the political authorities almost seemed to leave the reigns of the country to the health experts. In a completely different course of action, the Danish prime minister and her government came forward as the decision-makers, claiming that political and societal knowledge is as important – perhaps even more important – as medical facts, because controlling a pandemic is as much about leading a country (e.g., Bjørkdahl et al., 2021) (for a discussion of how the justifying press conference was used to justify measures and actions taken and of the legitimising of the power of the authorities in Scandinavia, see Kjeldsen, Chapter 5).

Economic robustness in the face of collective restrictions

Politicians and officials with responsibility for the economy became nested in communicative projects aimed at informing about economic downturns and justifying government countermeasures – sometimes also associating the problems with collective restrictions. The Swedish minister of finance spoke on several occasions about the shock effects on the economy:

What we see in the whole world is both a demand shock and a supply shock occurring at the same time; a demand shock where measures such as quarantine and closed borders reduce travel, but it is also the case that people change their behaviour due to the uncertainty that prevails. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020b)

The meaning and responsibilities conveyed in the statement become more nuanced with the context that Swedish citizens witnessed other countries introducing mandatory quarantine and border closures, but not Sweden. The Swedish representatives thus shaped strategic discourse around a “we” that could handle the crisis without major restrictions and with less negative effects on the economy. Greater restrictions with a negative economic impact were explicitly and implicitly linked to the actions of other countries, while Sweden was cast as undeservedly and negatively affected, as in a statement by the Swedish minister of trade and industry:

It has not gone unnoticed what effects this crisis will have on the labour market and companies, both based on the rather large restrictions that have been implemented not least among our neighbours in Europe and abroad, but also based on the fact that people are actually worried – and rightly so. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020c)

We may also understand the above claims about negative economic effects as discursive moves that expanded the network of risk to include a secondary risk object – collective restrictions meant to stop the virus – and at the same time additional interests to protect other than the health of risk groups – namely economic ones. So, although the claim that health was the priority was repeated in several Swedish press conferences, a closer examination of arguments shows that this too was conditioned by certain boundaries established in the discourse. Swedish leaders were not as willing to take financial responsibility for measures that forced businesses to close temporarily.

Denmark was in a different situation, with the partial lockdown imposed on 11 March 2020. In her speech that day, the prime minister acknowledged this by assuring that the lockdown would not “throw Denmark into an economic crisis”:

We must minimise activity in society as much as possible, but without stopping Denmark. And we must not throw Denmark into an economic crisis. So we choose changes in the public sector, to ensure that the private sector can continue in the best possible way, for the longest possible time. And all of us, of course, must be able to buy goods in the stores. It must be produced, it must be transported, and it must be sold. And I would like to emphasise that we are not in a food crisis. There is no need to stockpile either rye bread or toilet paper. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020a)

In Sweden, as described, the issues and problems related to the economy were primarily constructed discursively as an exigence created by the strict measures enacted by other countries. In Denmark, this discursive move was not an option for the Danish prime minister, who had constituted Denmark and herself as an agent who acts swiftly and determinately to impose necessary measures and restrictions. Thus, the Danish prime minister entered into a communicative dilemma where she had to minimise and justify the actions enacted by the government by putting forward a strategy (making changes in the public sector, not the private) and assuring that everyday necessities would still be available. The prime minister's assurance that it would not be necessary to stockpile immediately led – perhaps, not surprisingly – to many people doing just that.

As an oil-producing nation, Norway has a large amount of financial means ready in the so-called oil fund, or the government pension fund, which serves as a national reserve placed in equities, fixed income, and real estate (in late 2021, the value of the fund was almost NOK 12,000 billion). Thus, Norway's situation was very different. Even though the Norwegians enacted almost the same measures as the Danes, the response from the minister of finance, Jan Tore Sanner, was simply to ensure that the Norwegian economy and institutions were strong:

For the time being, it seems that growth in the Norwegian economy will slow down a bit before it will recover. [...] Fortunately, the Norwegian economy is solid and well equipped to handle this. We have mechanisms in the labour market that are precisely aimed at such situations as we are experiencing. The redundancy regulations ensure unemployment benefits for the individual employee if he or she is laid off. Then companies can quickly reduce their costs and we avoid redundancies. [...] We are well equipped to deal with the financial uncertainty we now see. (Government of Norway, 2020b)

Sanner found himself in a communicative project of managing the possibility that the (partial) shutdown could be a threat to the Norwegian economy. In managing this, he discursively enacted the strong Norwegian economy through semantic and modal choices that minimised financial troubles (*“For the time being, it seems that the growth in the Norwegian economy will slow down*

a bit before it will recover” [emphasis added]). He thus asserted that it was a temporary predicament and not a recession, but possibly reduced growth which would later turn (now without vagueness) to recovery. We thus see the reverse of vagueness as he then pronounced economic strength and preparedness, with declaratives (e.g., “the Norwegian economy *is* solid”) and added force (e.g., “mechanisms [...] which are *precisely* aimed at such situations”). Thereby, he employed a two-part communicative strategy that consisted of discursively minimising financial risk and maximising society’s resilience, and in so doing, also helped facilitate the process of closing Norwegian borders and many establishments.

Claims regarding the secondary effects of collective restrictions on general public health

Considerations regarding effects on general public health – of Covid-19 as well as of measures taken – illustrate the diverse interests and tasks for which authorities can be responsible (Höglund et al., 2018) and how partly different networks of risks can be formed (Hilgartner, 1992). For instance, the director general of the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020a) addressed broader health effects in connection with the topic of school closures:

The authority is not just an infection control authority but is responsible for children’s health. We need to think about that perspective. We have a measure that is not primarily intended to protect the children, so we must think about what we should weigh it against. There is a large group of children in Swedish schools and society who are in a socially vulnerable situation. We know that there is a large group of children with mental health problems. We have reported on it, it is the subject of great interest and commitment. We must not forget those aspects. For these children, school is often a cornerstone. We see that many children appeal: “Do not close the school, I want to stay here”. It must be weighed against the infection control aspect.

It is clear from the onset of this excerpt that the choice of direction in managing Covid-19 was justified by the positioning of the authority as responsible for public health and not just infection control. Then, the communicative strategy consisted of the director general advocating a logic of justice – that the children would suffer negative consequences but hardly any benefits of school closures. Furthermore, it consisted of drawing on the context of experiences from the field of public health, including others’ invested work in the issues, the agency’s reports, and knowledge of the high prevalence of socially disadvantaged children who need school as a safe place. Finally, the director general also utilised a discursive invocation of absent parties, by ventriloquising children’s voices and thus “borrowing” their identity position in making the point.

We see a different discursive treatment of the issue of public health in Denmark and Norway, where the risk object was primarily articulated as the virus itself, whereas possible secondary health effects of collective restrictions were dealt with subtly and rarely stated explicitly. Public health was thus addressed through the main message that if Covid-19 was not hindered, public health would be threatened. Facing the communicative project to justify large collective constraints for the Danish population, the Danish prime minister justified them on 13 March as follows:

It's going to cost us all. I'm sure we'll get through this together in a good way. And right now I know very well that the whole catalogue [of measures] is very aggressive and will be experienced as very aggressive, but I am of the complete clear conviction that it is worth it because we risk, if we do not do this, then the costs, humanly, health-wise, and financially, will be far, far greater. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020b)

The Danish prime minister, using a concede-and-counter strategy, declared that the collective restrictions did indeed have negative effects. She thus began by conceding possible criticism of the chosen path; then, she countered with plenty of force added (*"but I am of the complete clear conviction that it is worth it"*), which leaves no doubt as to where she stood on the issue. The actual argument, then, consists of the claim that the option with fewer measures and greater spread of Covid-19 is worse. The discourse was thus expanded, first when the dialogical alternative with negative effects of collective restrictions was introduced, and then it was contracted through strong investment in the correctness of selected measures, also considering the "humanly" and "health-wise" dimensions.

The articulation of the spread of infection as a central risk object was also evidenced by Denmark and Norway, addressing public health as a possible concern in connection with reopening establishments. Contrary to the conclusions of the Swedish political and expert leadership, this position implies that the safe alternative would be to keep establishments such as schools closed, and that opening them was associated with public health risks. At a press conference on 7 April 2020, the Norwegian minister of education stated the following:

Schools and kindergartens must be given time to prepare for an opening. Health considerations take precedence over all other considerations. The process must be safe for children and adults. Teachers and other staff should not be in doubt about how to organise everyday school life. (Government of Norway, 2020c)

At this point in April, the government discursively enacted a new phase in the strategy: to reopen. With the context of having articulated the spread of infection

and close contacts as major risks, those responsible now faced the communicative project of justifying the easing of collective restrictions. In other words, if the option of staying open was so risky, how should they proceed safely when society opened up? The Norwegian prime minister's communicative strategy was to utilise quite authoritative discourse, with assertions of obligation and necessity that the procedures for school activities would be safe for children and teachers. This marks a difference from the Swedish political and expert leadership, who emphasised that open schools are critical for public health and were not driving the spread of infection, thus setting the limit for actionable Covid-19 risk higher and for activities assumed to contribute more to viral spread.

Judgements on the severity of viral spread and the issue of immunity

Protective measures develop from articulations of the severity of Covid-19, just as risk perception is more generally assumed to be followed by a corresponding response (Aven & Renn, 2010). Leaders from all the countries also became involved in the communicative project of informing about the properties and dangers of Covid-19. We see recurring statements in all three countries that are similar to the description given by the Norwegian prime minister:

Most of us will not experience this disease as very dramatic. But we all have a special responsibility to protect people who are particularly vulnerable to becoming seriously ill from it. Therefore, we must all follow the health authorities' advice to prevent infection. (Government of Norway, 2020b)

At a basic level, politicians and expert authorities in all three countries attributed similar severity to Covid-19, in that it was primarily a danger to risk groups.

Two differences still distinguish the Swedish communicative project. The first consisted of the unique anticipation of natural immunity, expressed at about fifteen press conferences from March until May 2020 (Rasmussen, 2022). Such anticipation cannot coexist with the image of a dangerous virus without an immense ethical dilemma. The state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, stated on 16 March that herd immunity would be achieved when about half the population had been infected. Then, he rhetorically mitigated the risks of such a development of events by claiming that "90, 95 per cent of them will hardly be so ill that they even notice it" (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020c). The dilemma that herd immunity implies significant spread of infection was thereby momentarily addressed through the evaluation that even perceptible symptoms are rare. We cannot see this type of risk minimisation in the Danish and Norwegian material.

The second difference was that the anticipation of immunity also meant that the infection should not be stopped, and that measures that could be effective

against viral spread were not necessarily seen as the best option. During a press meeting in April, it was stated that decreased viral transmission was one reason why lockdown would not be preferable:

Many of us are in Andalusia, which has about the same population as Sweden. We have half as many deaths as in Sweden. Can you comment on that?
– There are many factors to weigh before comparing deaths and it is a bit early to compare with Spain. But you balance different things. It is too early to compare what the end result will be. The disadvantage of a lockdown is that there is not such a large spread of infection, and then it can increase when you ease it. (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020b)

Pointing to the similar population size of Andalusia and Sweden, and highlighting the mortality rates, the Public Health Agency of Sweden was put on the spot to provide an explanation. Two communicative strategies emerged: first, invoking the viability of having long-term sustainable measures, and second, denouncing the possibility of making comparisons as premature and complex. Most importantly, the lockdown strategy applied in Spain was evaluated negatively because it might stop the infection rate in the short term, having a negative effect on herd immunity, and then prolong the crisis when restrictions are lifted.

These characteristics of the Public Health Agency's communication imply that the differences, compared with Danish and Norwegian risk communication, were primarily about how the risk of viral spread was valued. In Denmark and Norway, the risk that significant viral spread would reach risk groups was judged to be too high. When this in fact occurred on a large scale in Sweden, the Public Health Agency and the government placed the responsibility on municipal and private care providers. However, the Swedish Corona Commission (2020) emphasised the proven correlation between the amount of viral spread and the number of deaths in country after country: Countries that failed to keep viral spread down had high death rates.

Invocations of the national risk management history

Another way of calling on others to align with certain management of the pandemic is to profess that the country has a certain risk management heritage. This was expressed on recurring occasions, for instance, when the director general of the Public Health Agency of Sweden was asked why they had waited until 27 March to lower the crowd limit to 50:

Well, we have a significant spread of infection. But above all, it is good that you grow into situations like this, I think. We see in many other countries where the police have to beat people on the street and force them inside because there is such a big jump. Law and order is one thing, but the other

thing, which is the great thing, is something else. There needs to be acceptance and understanding, I think. We have built a lot of the strategy, and infection control in general in Sweden, for decades, on acceptance and understanding of measures taken. And we have seen with the many programmes, whether vaccination of children, whether antibiotic resistance, whatever it is, that people understand that certain procedures are important. Those principles still apply. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020c)

The director general used two statements to support the fact that they were awaiting stricter restrictions on group gatherings. The first was that the measures followed the actual spread of infection, thus aligning with other statements about evidence-based rather than precautionary measures. The second statement consisted of the assumption that the measures should be stepped up gradually in order to gain public acceptance. This addressed the problem of communication efficiency, but not the epidemiological aspect of curbing viral spread through comprehensive measures early on. Further on, there was some fashioning of collective experience of other countries' Covid-19 management, with representations of behaviour that can be placed quite far away on a scale of authoritarianism ("other countries where the police have to beat people on the street and force them inside"). The director general then presented a more positive evaluation of voluntary measures than law and order, and some further ideological positioning ("there needs to be acceptance and understanding, I think"). In addition, he constructed a collective identity by conveying a common, positive organisational and national experience of working with voluntary measures and generalisation of efficiency.

The Norwegian prime minister explicitly mentioned how Norwegian society had prevailed in previous dramatic events, and that elevated social trust was the defining factor:

Together, we have all contributed to building the welfare society. When terror and misfortune have befallen us, we have come through it together. When freedom has been threatened, Norwegians have given everything for each other. This has given our country an advantage that is more powerful than any weapon, and more valuable than any oil fund: namely that we trust each other. It is this trust that will carry us through the crisis we are now in. Without the high trust between citizens and the authorities, we could never have gotten the whole of Norway involved in the fight to combat the coronavirus. (Government of Norway, 2020d)

The prime minister first mentioned the welfare society, which has been much discussed in relation to trust (Ihlen et al., 2022). In addition, however, she also mentioned terror, alluding to the massacre on Utøya (see, e.g., Olsson & Erikson, 2020), as well as World War II and the sacrifices people made. Since these are

well-known and powerful images for many Norwegians, she did not elaborate. Instead, she relied on these collective stories in her attempt to build a bridge to trust in the authorities, which could in turn fuel resilience. By discursively drawing on the management of such major national events, she called on others to align with the joint work in a new major event.

We did not see this invocation of major, historical national events in the press conferences with the Swedish and Danish prime ministers. Another way of drawing on the history of risk management is thus shown in more subdued references to previous methods of dealing with virus outbreaks, such as below when the director general of the Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen] certified the suitability of future measures and thus called on people to believe in them:

Well, I thought maybe I could just say a little about the health professional documentation regarding large events. We have good documentation, but it is also a new disease that we have only known about for a few months. We have experience from major outbreaks of influenza, and of these initiatives which we propose here. They are effective in preventing and reducing the epidemic, especially if timed well. So therefore it is timely diligence to do so now and implement that recommendation. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020c)

In both quotes, then, we see how previous experience and claimed success functioned as the main rationale for the chosen measures. The communicative strategies of the two actors differ vastly, however: The Danish director general implied that the authorities knew what they were doing based on a specific medical history, but the Norwegian prime minister relied on broad collective memories of war, terror, and state-building. Then again, the different roles offer different strategies: A national leader might be expected to use rhetoric matching the gravitas of the situation, and thus pathos, whereas a public servant must balance this against a bureaucratic ethos of correctness, impartiality, and accountability (Kettle, 2008).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined how leading politicians and representatives of public health authorities in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway attempted to create consent for their strategic choices to adopt or refrain from collective prevention measures at the critical beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. To realise this, we applied a strategy-as-practice perspective (Whittington, 1996) and focused on press conferences at the critical juncture between March and April 2020. Thus, instead of assuming that strategy already exists and has only been transmitted, or taking explicit government statements about their strategy at face value, we

hope to have contributed with an understanding that strategy, also in the context of Covid-19 management, is something that is “done” continuously, through communicative action. In Figure 4.1, we proposed a conceptual understanding of how politicians and officials gathered consent for strategic choices during the Covid-19 crisis, identifying particular discursive moves within five overarching themes including claims regarding knowledge, economics, secondary effects on public health, risks of viral spread, and risk-management history.

As these themes were examined in detail with the help of dialogical analysis (Linell, 1998), we further contribute to bridging the gap between micro-level discourse and major strategic events (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). We demonstrated how arguments were posed to justify major choices and call on others to align with them. In doing so, we also showed that differences in the management of Covid-19 are not solely explained by political-administrative attributes (Bylund & Packard, 2021), but also by trade-offs made and positions taken by governments and authorities that surface in their communication efforts (however, for a discussion of how the different administrative traditions and models of governance did influence the different pandemic responses in the Nordics, see Sandberg, Chapter 2).

The first theme that proved to be important was how representatives of all three countries drew on claims to knowledge and thus formed a strong epistemic position backing their strategic choices regarding collective measures, thereby also calling on others to support them. Such a position is often formed by an authoritative voice, with declarative statements that leave hardly any doubt about the speaker’s position or the state of affairs. The discourse features dialogical contraction, rather than the speaker opening up dialogical space for different possibilities. Differences that we still identify are that the Swedish government and the Public Health Agency limited which collective measures could be used by presenting that there must be evidence in advance regarding risks as well as the particular measures. Such a position is concerning when the risk is new, knowledge is limited, and measures are only potentially effective – which has also been shown in studies that could be counted as “evidence” (Aven & Renn, 2010; Stirling, 2007). The Norwegian and Danish governments justified collective measures by pronouncing the seriousness of the situation, precaution, and the great risks of the spread of infection, and then presented evidence as measures could eventually be evaluated.

We also found that economics is an area that is affected and shaped discursively in support of the chosen path regarding collective measures. The Swedish government proclaimed that closing businesses and national borders would have major economic consequences (e.g., “shock effects on supply and demand”), which helped justify excluding collective measures. At the same time, albeit implicitly, a limit was set on what stopping the spread of infection was worth. In contrast, the Norwegian government discursively enacted a strong

economy and minimised the risks, while the Danish government emphasised that the closure was partial and thus less harmful to the economy. Thus, in various ways, arguments regarding the economy were drawn upon in support of the chosen strategies.

Additionally, we identified differences between the countries' Covid-19 communications concerning themes of the danger of viral spread and how to define and manage risks to public health. In the material studied, the Swedish government placed the responsibility for infection-related decisions on the Public Health Agency, which in turn asserted its broad public health mission, communicatively forming a complex network of risk. The virus was articulated as a harmless object of risk to the masses, while secondary effects of strict collective measures were articulated as bringing difficult public health problems. Furthermore, natural immunity was anticipated among healthy citizens, while risk groups were to be protected. This meant that all infections must not be stopped, and there was no reason to implement all measures, especially those assumed to have negative effects on public health. Thus, two major differences emerge here. The Danish and Norwegian governments did not place the responsibility for infection-control decisions on a single authority with a broad public health mission, but could be said to be engaged in crisis management regarding the viral spread and minimising its death toll, communicating a belief that the rest of society was robust enough to handle the measures implemented. The second difference is that there were no mentions of achieving immunity in Norway and Denmark, which saved them from the paradox of simultaneous communication about viral infections being both protective and dangerous (see Rasmussen, 2022).

A final theme with significance for how choices regarding collective measures were justified is the invocation of a risk-management history. In this respect, the director general of the Public Health Agency of Sweden draws on a history of successful, voluntary vaccination programmes, advocating voluntary measures over collective restrictions. However, as with the director general's idea of the viability of escalating countermeasures gradually when the spread of infection had taken hold in Europe and increased in Sweden, one can question the viability of leaning towards a history of successful voluntary vaccination programmes. Indeed, the escalation of measures can very well be interpreted as lateness, and vaccination programmes involve people acting in self-interest, which is not so easily transferred to the Covid-19 situation when the masses ought to act altruistically for distant others, often and for a long time. It is also interesting that he drew on a context of police brutality, only to position his decisions as humane and reciprocal. The anti-authoritarian position is thus made viable in relation to a dialogical extreme. A rhetorically more difficult and relevant context to draw upon would have been a measure such as a two-week mandatory quarantine for entry from risk areas such as the Italian and Austrian

Alps, which was well within the powers of the Communicable Diseases Act, but which the agency waived. In comparison with the Swedish risk communication, the Norwegian communication was most different, the analysis of this theme showed. As opposed to justifying strategic choices with the help of everyday vaccination programmes, the Norwegian government justified extensive measures by drawing on a history of joint efforts in times of severe crisis, from the World War II to the massacre on Utøya in 2011.

As an avenue for further research, and since discourse analysis is suitable for identifying ideological positioning, future studies could take our observations of ideational sentiments expressed in government communication and make such discourse the focus of a larger empirical investigation. Also, instead of focusing on unimodal communication in a traditional communication pathway such as press conferences, future studies might take a different methodological route, revealing other aspects of government communication by focusing on their multimodal discourse on social media (see Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022; see also Lindholm et al., Chapter 7; Fiskvik et al., Chapter 11). Furthermore, we have focused on patterns of discourse and on context drawn upon *in* the discourse, creating dialogical dynamics, and in a broad material that spans planned prime minister speeches to spontaneous government communication. Therefore, future studies could focus on genre-specific characteristics of Covid-19 communication, as well as individuals' unique rhetoric, and their overall rhetorical situation.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 296347) and Formas (grant no. 2020-02865_3).

References

- Andersson, S., & Aylott, N. (2020). Sweden and coronavirus: Unexceptional exceptionalism. *Social Sciences*, 9(12), 232. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9120232>
- Aven, T., & Renn, O. (2010). *Risk management and governance: Concepts, guidelines and applications*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-13926-0>
- Aven, T., & Renn, O. (2020). Some foundational issues related to risk governance and different types of risks. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(9), 1121–1134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2019.1569099>
- Bjørkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Villadsen, L., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidaritatem: Rhetorical leadership strategies in Scandinavia during Covid-19. In M. Lewis, E. Govender, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating Covid-19: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 163–184). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Boholm, Å., & Corvellec, H. (2011). A relational theory of risk. *Journal of Risk Research*, 14(2), 175–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2010.515313>
- Bouvier, G., & Rasmussen, J. (2022). *Qualitative research using social media*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429319334>
- Bylund, P. L., & Packard, M. D. (2021). Separation of power and expertise: Evidence of the tyranny of experts in Sweden's Covid-19 responses. *Southern Economic Journal*, 87(4), 1300–1319. <https://doi.org/10.1002/soej.12493>

- Cameron, I., & Jonsson Cornell, A. (2020). Fredstida kriser i en konstitutionell kontekst [Peacetime crises in a constitutional context]. *Svensk Juristtidning*, 10, 1172–1190. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-425955>
- Clarke, I., Kwon, W., & Wodak, R. (2012). A context-sensitive approach to analysing talk in strategy meetings. *British Journal of Management*, 23(4), 455–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00759.x>
- Danish Prime Minister's Office. (2020a, March 11). *Pressemøde om Covid-19 den 11. marts 2020* [Press conference on Covid-19 on 11 March 2020] [Press conference]. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>
- Danish Prime Minister's Office. (2020b, March 13). *Pressemøde den 13. marts 2020* [Press conference on 13 March 2020] [Press conference]. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-den-13-marts-2020/>
- Danish Prime Minister's Office. (2020c, March 6). *Pressemøde den 6. marts 2020* [Press conference on 6 March 2020] [Press conference]. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-den-6-marts-2020/>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). *Organizational crisis communication: A multivocal approach*. Sage.
- Furman, I., Saka, E., Yıldırım, S., & Elbeyi, E. (2019). News coverage of the Gulf Crisis in the Turkish mediascape: Agendas, frames, and manufacturing consent. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 1340–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1932-8036.2019.000005>
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2020a, March 10). *Statsministern kommenterar extrainkallade europeiska rådet* [The Prime Minister comments on the specially convened European Council] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-Q96nOzgXw>
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2020b, March 31). *Magdalena Andersson presenterar prognos för det ekonomiska läget* [Magdalena Andersson presents a forecast for the economic situation] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x30N3P5q4BA>
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2020c, March 27). *Ibrahim Baylan och Eva Nordmark kommenterar dagens möte med arbetsmarknadens parter* [Ibrahim Baylan and Eva Nordmark comment on today's meeting with the social partners] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXg2vK9qf7U>
- Government of Norway. (2020a, March 24). *Koronasituasjonen: Pressekonferanse om videre tiltak i håndteringen av korona-pandemien* [The corona situation: Press conference on further measures in handling the corona pandemic] [Press conference]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/pressekonferanse-om-det-videre-arbeidet-med-korona-pandemien/id2694656/>
- Government of Norway. (2020b, March 10). *Koronasituasjonen: Statsministeren og finansministeren orienterer om tiltak knyttet til koronaviruset* [The corona situation: The prime minister and the minister of finance provide information on measures linked to the coronavirus] [Press conference]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/statsministeren-og-finansministeren-orienterer-om-tiltak-knyttet-til-koronaviruset/id2693004/>
- Government of Norway. (2020c, April 7). *Koronasituasjonen: Pressekonferanse om korona-tiltak* [The corona situation: Press conference on corona measures] [Press conference]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/pressekonferanse-om-korona-tiltak/id2696977/>
- Government of Norway. (2020d, March 18). *Dette er ikke tiden for «jeg». Dette er tiden for «vi»* [This is not the time for “I”. This is the time for “we”] [Press conference]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/taler-og-innlegg/statsministeren/talerogartikler/2020/dette-er-ikke-tiden-for-jeg.-dette-er-tiden-for-vi/id2694026/>
- Government of Sweden. (1998). *Miljöbalk (1998:808)* [Environmental code]. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/miljobalk-1998808_sfs-1998-808
- Helsingen, L. M., Refsum, E., Gjostein, D. K., Loberg, M., Bretthauer, M., Kalager, M., & Emilsson, L. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Norway and Sweden – threats, trust, and impact on daily life: A comparative survey. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1597. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09615-3>

- Hilgartner, S. (1992). The social construction of risk objects. In J. Short, & L. Clarke (Eds.), *Organizations, uncertainties, and risk* (pp. 39–53). Westview Press.
- Höglund, L., Holmgren Caicedo, M., Mårtensson, M., & Svärdsten, F. (2018). Strategic management in the public sector: How tools enable and constrain strategy making. *International Public Management Journal*, 21(5), 822–849. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2018.1427161>
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Á. Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic* (pp. 184–198). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669>
- Jarzabkowski, P., & Seidl, D. (2008). The role of meetings in the social practice of strategy. *Organization Studies*, 29(11), 1391–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840608096388>
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Sweden: Lone hero or stubborn outlier? In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 155–164). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Kettle, D. F. (2008). Public bureaucracies. In R. A. W. Rhodes, S. A. Binder, & B. A. Rockamn (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of political institutions* (pp. 366–385). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548460.001.0001>
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Ihlen, Ø., Just, S. N., & Larsson, A. O. (2021). Expert ethos and the strength of networks: Negotiations of credibility in mediated debate on Covid-19. *Health Promotion International*, 37(2), daab095. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab095>
- Klinke, A., & Renn, O. (2002). A new approach to risk evaluation and management: Risk-based, precaution-based, and discourse-based strategies. *Risk Analysis*, 22(6), 1071–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1539-6924.00274>
- Kohtamäki, M., Whittington, R., Vaara, E., & Rabetino, R. (2021). Making connections: Harnessing the diversity of strategy-as-practice research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 24, 210–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12274>
- Laage-Thomsen, J., & Frandsen, S. L. (2022). Pandemic preparedness systems and diverging Covid-19 responses within similar public health regimes: A comparative study of expert perceptions of pandemic response in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. *Globalization and Health*, 18(3). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-022-00799-4>
- Lassnigg, L. (2014). ‘Use of current best evidence’: Promises and illusions, limitations and contradictions in the triangle of research, policy and practice. *International Journal of Training Research*, 10, 179–203. <https://doi.org/10.5172/ijtr.2012.10.3.179>
- Linell, P. (1998). *Approaching dialogue: Talk, interaction and contexts in dialogical perspectives*. John Benjamins.
- Ludvigsson, J. F. (2020). The first eight months of Sweden’s Covid-19 strategy and the key actions and actors that were involved. *Acta Paediatrica*, 109(12), 2459–2471. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.15582>
- Marchiori, M., & Bulgacov, S. (2012). Strategy as communicational practice in organizations. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 6, 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2012.654550>
- Olsson, E.-K., & Erikson, M. (2020). Crisis communication in public organizations. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication* (pp. 417–434). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236>
- Pierre, J. (2020). Nudges against pandemics: Sweden’s Covid-19 containment strategy in perspective. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 478–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2020.1783787>
- Public Health Agency of Sweden. (2020a, March 13). *Folkhälsomyndighetens pressträff om Covid-19 [The Public Health Agency’s press conference on Covid-19]* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MFp_Olwu5E
- Public Health Agency of Sweden. (2020b, April 27). *Folkhälsomyndighetens pressträff om Covid-19 [The Public Health Agency’s press conference on Covid-19]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL36S61C3io>
- Public Health Agency of Sweden. (2020c, March 17). *Folkhälsomyndighetens pressträff om*

- Covid-19 [The Public Health Agency's press conference on Covid-19]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQAh1d8urOA>
- Rasmussen, J. (2022). *Frågor om tydlighet och samstämmighet i den svenska riskkommunikationen om covid-19 under våren 2020: Underlagsrapport till SOU 2022:10 Sverige under pandemin [Questions about clarity and coherence in the Swedish risk communication on Covid-19 in the spring of 2020: Background report to SOU 2022: 10 Sweden during the pandemic]*. <https://coronakommissionen.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/underlagsrapport-fragor-om-tydlighet-och-samstammighet-i-den-svenska-riskkommunikationen-om-covid-19-under-varen-2020.pdf>
- Rasmussen, J., & Kroon, A. (2012). Understanding “communication gaps” among personnel in high-risk workplaces from a dialogical perspective. *Safety Science*, 50(1), 39–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2011.06.009>
- Samra-Fredericks, D. (2003). Strategizing as lived experience and strategists' everyday efforts to shape strategic direction. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(1), 141–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.t01-1-00007>
- Stirling, A. (2007). Risk, precaution and science: Towards a more constructive policy debate. *EMBO Reports*, 8(4), 309–315. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7400953>
- Swedish Corona Commission. (2020). *Äldreomsorgen under pandemin: SOU 2020:80 [Elderly care during the pandemic]*. Swedish Government Offices. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/12/sou-202080/>
- Timmermans, S., & Mauck, A. (2005). The promises and pitfalls of evidence-based medicine. *Health Affairs*, 24(1), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.24.1.18>
- Tømmerbakke, S. G. (2020). FHI advarer på nytt mot regjeringens strategi [FHI again warns against the strategy of the government]. *Dagens Medisin*. <https://www.dagensmedisin.no/artikler/2020/04/08/fhi-advarer-pa-nytt-mot-regjeringens-strategi/>
- Vaara, E. (2010). Taking the linguistic turn seriously: Strategy as a multifaceted and interdiscursive phenomenon. *Advances in Strategic Management*, 27, 29–50. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0742-3322\(2010\)0000027005](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0742-3322(2010)0000027005)
- Warren, G. W., Lofstedt, R., & Wardman, J. K. (2021). Covid-19: The winter lockdown strategy in five European nations. *Journal of Risk Research*, 24(3-4), 267–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1891802>
- Wenzel, M., & Koch, J. (2018). Strategy as staged performance: A critical discursive perspective on keynote speeches as a genre of strategic communication. *Strategic Management Journal*, 39, 639–663. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2725>
- Whittington, R. (1996). Strategy as practice. *Long Range Planning*, 29(5), 731–735. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301\(96\)00068-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301(96)00068-4)

Crafting a crisis

How the genre of the justifying press conference constituted the Covid-19 pandemic as an emergency and legitimised the power of authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Jens E. Kjeldsen

Department of Information Science and Media Studies,
University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

Why did citizens adhere to the strict measures imposed by national authorities during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020? One part of the answer is the way the first press conferences constituted the situation as an urgent crisis and the authorities as legitimate leaders in charge. This chapter examines the rhetoric of government press conferences in Scandinavia during the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss the press conference as a rhetorical genre and establish the studied press conferences as instances of a subgenre of the political press conference: the *justifying* press conference. Phases, procedures, and aims of this subgenre are defined, and the arrival phase is particularly examined. This chapter demonstrates how the multimodal aspects of the press conferences contributed to constituting the pandemic as an emergency and establishing the ethos of the authorities as active and responsible. This constitution functioned as a multimodal justification of the measures and actions taken and the legitimising of the power of the authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Keywords: ethos, multimodal event, Covid-19 pandemic, press conference rhetoric, Scandinavia

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis that unfolded from the beginning of 2020, led to a remarkable increase in the use of legacy media and government press conferences. In Northern Europe and the UK, for instance, citizens turned to the public service broadcasters and mainstream media to follow the press conferences where national governments provided information and directions for action. In the US, the White House Task Force began daily press conferences that were covered extensively by the media.

In this chapter, I take a rhetorical genre approach to the mediated press conference as a multimodal event and a specific genre. I examine the press conferences given by Scandinavian authorities during the critical first period of the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, when many countries decided to lock down. In this chapter, I seek to answer two research questions:

- RQ1. Which type of rhetorical genre does the examined press conferences belong to, and what phases and procedures does this genre include?
- RQ2. How do selected examples of this genre contribute to justifying measures and legitimising the power of the authorities?

I first discuss the press conference as a genre and explain my theoretical departure points, method, and choice of material. The analysis establishes the press conferences as instances of a subgenre of the political press conference: the *justifying* press conference. I define phases and procedures of this subgenre and demonstrate how the examined press conferences contributed to constituting the urgency of the crisis and the ethos of the authorities, thereby justifying the measures and legitimising the power of the authorities.

The press conference as an object of study

Press conferences may seem old-fashioned in a world where communication is carried out online, via social media and adapted through algorithms. However, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that press conferences are still relevant and indispensable in high-risk situations and crises. The need to communicate important information to media and citizens quickly and directly led governments around the world to hold press conferences broadcast both online and in legacy media. Many countries even decided to give such press conferences daily.

Despite the lasting importance of press conferences, and their renewed relevance in the Covid-19 crisis, studies of press conferences are limited. Most research deals with the question-and-answer session (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017), or the time after the speech or presentation when questions are posed (Hernández, 2021). Such studies examine the interaction between speakers and

journalists: the adversariness of the questions (Eriksson, 2011), the strategical manoeuvring (van Eemeren, 2010) of politicians (Demir, 2016), the role of journalists' questions and moves to secure accountability (Hernández, 2021), and the confrontational manoeuvring in spokespersons' argumentative replies through dissociation (Wu, 2019a) or by declaring a standpoint either unallowed or indisputable (Wu, 2019b). Other studies examine the shamelessness or impoliteness of spokespersons (Wodak et al., 2021) or their strategies of evading questions (Gabrielsen et al., 2017). Research from Sweden has examined the historical development of governmental press conferences (Larsson, 2012), journalists' follow-up questions (Eriksson, 2011), and image-repair (Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012). Research from the US argues that former president Trump's so-called homestyle was not conducive to effective crisis governance, as enacted in his daily Covid-19 press briefings (Just et al., 2021).

The research, then, almost entirely departs from a pragmatic or argumentative approach studying the verbal interaction between spokespersons and journalists. Some research, however, does address the aspects of the press conference most relevant to this chapter. One relevant type of research examines the press conference as a rhetorical and television-mediated genre. Kumar (2003), for instance, looks at the history and variation in the basic elements of the presidential press conference. Kumar has also shown how the American presidential press conference as a genre changed considerably with the expansion of television beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. With television, the audience increased, and so did the rhetorical stakes, and the "press conference became a vehicle that presidents used to explain their policies and actions to the public, not reporters" (Kumar, 2005: 183). This is particularly relevant for many of the Covid-19 press conferences, because the communication was not only – not even primarily – directed to journalists, but instead to the audience.

Also relevant are studies of the generic and procedural aspects of press conferences. Hernández distinguishes between the first and second section of the press conference: In the first, the spokesperson makes their opening statements uninterrupted, and in the second, journalists pose questions and spokespersons answer, according to specific procedural rules (Hernández, 2021). Another genre-based study (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017) describes the historical development of the political press conference, mentions three subgenres, and describes three activities of the genre: the political speech, the question-and-answer session, and the post-interviews.

Theory

My analysis builds on two theoretical approaches: first, rhetorical theories of situation, genre, and ethos, and second, theories of semiotics and multimodality.

Rhetorical situation, genre, and ethos

Press conferences are authorities' rhetorical response to an urgent situation in need of communication. Thus, they are a prime example of what rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) described as a rhetorical response to a rhetorical situation.

A rhetorical situation consists of three constitutive elements: 1) an exigence, which is "an imperfection marked by urgency" that "demands" (Bitzer, 1968: 6) a rhetorical response – for the problem to be rhetorical, it must be solvable (wholly or partially) with the help of rhetoric; 2) an audience, defined as the individuals or groups that the rhetor wishes to influence to think differently or to act – a rhetorical audience is limited to those who can be influenced by the rhetor and are able to solve or mitigate the problem; and 3) constraints, which are the mental, physical, practical, and cultural contingencies that the rhetor must relate to when addressing the exigence. The rhetor's central task is to "discover and make use of proper constraints in his message in order that his response, in conjunction with other constraints operative in the situation, will influence the audience" (Bitzer, 1980: 23).

Two things follow from this account: First, depending on changes in exigences, audiences, or constraints, the rhetorical situation will change accordingly. This, then, calls for different types of fitting responses. Second, similar situations will evoke similar rhetorical responses. In rhetoric, we know these recurring and resemblant responses as genres. Genres are considered as groups of responses which share a certain type of situation and exigence, and they also share certain types of content and stylistic traits (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). In this way, genres are a form of typified rhetorical action (Miller, 1984) that offers certain roles for speakers and audiences and helps us address and negotiate the social needs and exigences in recurring situations.

Just as situations and genres form the responses of rhetors, rhetors have the power to frame, form, and constitute situations and genres (Vatz, 1973). Thus, the way authorities act rhetorically during a press conference will constitute the character and urgency of the crisis as well as their own ethos. Understanding the rhetorical responses of the authorities, and the reception and ensuing approval and actions of the citizens, then, requires an understanding of how the authorities rhetorically constituted the situation and their own ethos.

Theories of ethos and credibility date back to Aristotle's (2004) distinction between three dimensions of ethos: good sense (*phronêsis*), good moral values (*aretê*), and goodwill toward the audience (*eunoia*). Contemporary persuasion studies have confirmed these three dimensions through survey experiments calling them competence (*phronêsis*), character (*aretê*), and caring, or goodwill (*eunoia*) (McCroskey, 2001; McCroskey & Young, 1981). In contemporary rhetorical studies, ethos is not an intrinsic property of a communicator, but the judgment an audience makes based on the communication and behaviour of the communicator.

The traditional and social psychological understanding of ethos (credibility) is almost exclusively developed based on verbal communication and individual sources (speakers). While we have research on the ethos of sources (speakers, for instance), organisations (Baumlin & Scisco, 2018), design, and online material such as web pages (Warnick & Heineman, 2012), there appear to be no studies examining ethos related to press conferences. Therefore, my analysis of ethos examines the press conferences multimodally, by looking for semiotic signs of competence, character, and goodwill or caring towards the audience. Thus, it is necessary to connect to theories of semiotics and multimodality.

Semiotics and multimodality

My analysis of the multimodal elements of the press conferences utilises the study of semiotics (Chandler, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), multimodality (Bateman et al., 2017; Jewitt, 2017; Kjeldsen, 2018), and visual rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2018).

While verbal language is the dominant mode in press conferences, it is only one mode of those used. Therefore, I base my analysis on four assumptions of multimodal theory that leads the analysis beyond just language, to see the rhetorical meaning-making created through several different modes. The first assumption is that “language is part of a multimodal ensemble” (Jewitt, 2017: 15). Language is one mode among many (including body, voice, movement, imagery, different forms of technology, etc.) that are nestled into each other while working in unison when communicating in a situation such as a press conference. It is a theoretical tenet in multimodal theory that gaze, gesture, and posture not only function as a support to speech, but also provide communication in their own right (Jewitt, 2017). Consisting of several different modes, a press conference is a prime example of such a multimodal ensemble. The second assumption is that “each mode in a multimodal ensemble is understood as realizing different communicative work” (Jewitt, 2017: 15). In a press conference, the verbal mode mostly provides the informational work, while the procedural, non-verbal, and other visual modes are essential to the construction of communicative coherence and credibility. The third assumption is that “people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes” (Jewitt, 2017: 16). Thus, when organising a crisis press conference, one will choose between different possible modes and combine them to achieve the specific aim of the press conference. The fourth assumption is that “meanings of signs fashioned from multimodal semiotic resources are, like speech, social” (Jewitt, 2017: 17). In accordance with this view, a press conference is rhetorically constructed in a way that is shaped both by the intentions of the organiser and by the norms and rules of the situation and the culture. Entering first to a press conference, for instance, is socially and culturally connected to importance.

The necessity of a multimodal approach, then, is that emergency and ethos is not only constructed through verbal language alone, but through an orchestration of different modes. Studying this requires a multimodal analysis building on the notions of modes and semiotic resources. I use Gunther Kress's (2017: 60) definition of mode as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource making meaning". Common modes used in press conferences are speech, gesture, writing, imagery, and different forms of typographic communication (e.g., charts and graphs). I use the term semiotic resource in a similar way as the definition offered by van Leeuwen (2005: 285): "the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes". Semiotic resource is sometimes understood as a kind of mode, and sometimes as a kind of media. I construe semiotic resources as meaning-making manifestations of certain aspects of modes. While gesture is a mode, different types of gestures constitute different forms of semiotic resources. Such resources, then, are parallel to the concept of code in traditional semiotics (Chandler, 2007), which is seen as the rule combining signifier and signified. Calm and composed gestures, for instance, may signify control. I write *may* signify, because the use of the term semiotic resource instead of the term code is a way of acknowledging that such meaning-making and semiotic systems are not fixed and stable. In some situations, calm and composed gestures may signify timidity or nervousness. Thus, meaning-making is both established through previous use and actual application in specific situations. When looking at the manifestations of semiotic resources for ethos-making, some resources – or signs – stand out as particularly relevant (Vigsø, 2017). In examining the dimensions of character and competence in ethos, for instance, multimodal signs of importance will be particularly relevant. In most situations, it would be unsuitable for a politician or a health representative to explicitly state verbally that they are important; thus, such rhetorical work is often done multimodally and is thereby less conspicuous.

Theories of visual grammar and semiotics teach us that various resources may indicate importance (Arnheim, 1974, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Placing an element in the centre of a visual representation, for instance, can be a sign of importance (Arnheim, 1982). In the same way, certain verbal and non-verbal signs may signify importance in press conferences: standing up, being close to the centre or the person placed in the centre, entering first, being serious, being brief and precise in delivery, and using a manuscript.

As any other temporal human communication activity, the order and structure of press conferences are conventionalised in the genre. This ascribes meaning and importance to the elements. Just as the centre in visual rhetoric is imbued with importance (Arnheim, 1982), so may the first arrival, or the first person in a line, be imbued with importance. If such ideological structures follow the common and accepted norms, they are not noticed. However, when events deviate from the normal, or are compared with other examples and cultural

norms, their rhetorical significance becomes evident. Looking closely at such procedures and norms in press conferences, then, allows us to see how they assign importance and urgency to situations and ascribe ethos to participants and communities.

Material and method

Material

The analysed material consists of twelve videos of the most watched and important press conferences in the middle of March 2020, which was the most critical period in the early lockdown phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have examined the following press conferences:

- Danish authorities on March 6, 10, 11, and 12
- Norwegian authorities on March 10, 11, 12, and 13
- Swedish authorities on March 10 (two instances), 11, and 13

These press conferences were chosen because of the urgency communicated and the presence of the most important political representatives. In all three countries, these briefings involve either the prime minister or the minister of health, or both.

Method

My analysis builds on all of the aforementioned press conferences, but this chapter only features the most relevant examples. I have carried out interpretative, rhetorical criticism of the videos. Hence, they are analyses of what television viewers and online viewers saw, to establish an understanding of the genre and its general forms of phases and procedures, as well as an understanding of how selected multimodal elements may contribute to constitute urgency and the ethos of the authorities. The excerpts quoted in the chapter have been translated by me to English.

First, I applied the theory of rhetorical situation and genre on the situation and the press conferences. Then, I examined the videos several times to establish the order of events and norms of procedure in the press conferences. This allowed me to establish four phases (arrival, presentation, interaction, and closing). I then analysed each phase by looking for signs of urgency and ethos of importance. I looked at five multimodal resources:

1. Mise-en-scène (e.g., physical composition of the room and background imagery)
2. Television presentation and camera work (e.g., use of banners, angle, shot position, and movement)
3. Non-verbal rhetoric (the body language, movement, and non-verbal communication of the actors, including clothing)
4. Props (devices used to facilitate communication)
5. Verbal rhetoric (the spoken words)

The account below is structured according to the four main phases; however, my analysis and results only deal with the two first phases (arrival and presentation). The interaction and closing phases, as well as the pre- and post-phases, are only dealt with briefly to explain their framing of and relevance to the two phases examined.

Analysis and results

Since Ekström and Eriksson (2017) have not provided names for the subgenres of press conferences they have mentioned, I have coined the subgenres in the following way: First, the announcing press conferences, where “government press relations officials invite journalists to press conferences to announce policies, reforms and other political initiatives” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 345); second, the diplomacy press conferences, where there is a joint session with a primary objective to “display mutual relationships between governments, states, and international organisations” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 346); and finally, the crisis press conference, a “political press conference that is organised to manage criticism and political crises in the context of media scandals” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017: 346). Each of these subgenres constitute groups of similar rhetorical responses to distinct situations with specific constraints (Bitzer, 1968). None of them, however, share the special rhetorical circumstances of the press conferences during the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis.

A new subgenre – the justifying press conference and its modes

The pandemic press conferences are best seen as a combination of the announcing and the crisis press conference. They are a response to a crisis, but not a crisis for the speaker or organisation; instead, they are a response to a shared national crisis that the speaker and authorities are expected to inform about and deal with. Thus, the types of press conferences during the Covid-19 pandemic stand out as a yet undescribed genre, which I call the *justifying press conference*.

It is justifying because the main exigence of the genre is to explain and justify the measures and actions taken. It does so by describing the situation and the need for strict measures – as I will demonstrate – through rhetorically constituting urgency. Since this type of press conference is a type of recurring situation with similar responses, it must be seen as a specific rhetorical genre (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). There is also a need to address the citizens' uncertainty, worry, and alarm. A fitting response not only needs to provide knowledge and justification, but also reassurance and comfort. The audience is the population in general, because the situation and measures concern all citizens. The main constraints will differ depending on the phases of the pandemic; however, in the phase I examine, which we may call “crisis hits” (Mølster & Kjeldsen, 2022), important constraints are a lack of full knowledge of the situation, and thus an inability for the authorities to know and communicate the circumstances and consequences for certain (Kjeldsen et al., 2022). In Scandinavia, it is also an important constraint that all three countries have high levels of trust, particularly evident during the early phases of the pandemic (Helsingen et al., 2020; Ihlen et al., 2022; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

As a multimodal ensemble, the justifying press conference utilises a variety of modes. I examine the following: verbal speech, physical movement, positioning of spokespersons, props, and slides.

The media framing of the justifying press conference

Most people encounter the justifying press conference in the news media; therefore, it is necessary to examine the televised mediation of the informative-justifying crisis press conference. In Scandinavia, this primarily means experiencing press conferences through the public broadcasters: SVT (Swedish national broadcasting), NRK (Norwegian national broadcasting), and DR (Danish national broadcasting). The constitution of the urgency and the initial ethos of the communicators, then, is formed by the way the television broadcasts frame the situation.

In the minutes – even hours – before the press conferences, the news media makes time for direct broadcasting: They announce that the press conference will happen and make time for discussion and speculation in advance. A pre-broadcast of discussions in the studio and with reporters waiting for the press conference builds up anticipation and a sense of importance, which is intensified when the speakers arrive and the reporters immediately stop the conversation and direct their attention towards the action.

The broadcasting companies not only transmit the press conferences, they also offer information and interpretations through banners, words, graphics, and colours on the screen. In this way, they constitute the situation as serious and urgent even before the press conference starts. The broadcast of the

11 March press conference from DR, for instance, presented a banner at the bottom of the screen with a yellow band that read “BREAKING”. A blue band provided information during the briefing about the number of those infected with Covid-19, and below this, the largest banner read: “DENMARK CLOSES DOWN” (see Figure 5.5). In the same way, the transmission from NRK had banners stating that the broadcast was directly from the prime minister’s office (see Figure 5.2). During the transmission, the broadcast companies selected certain bits of information, which they stated on banners. DR, for instance, wrote, “1,303 Danish citizens in quarantine”, on their transmission on 11 March (see Figure 5.1).

In the pre-phase, then, the banners and the television pictures of the press room and podiums with logos, the waiting and expectations, and the discussion and speculation all contribute to ascribing importance to the event and to the speakers and constitute their ethos as important actors that will address the urgency. After the press conference, in the post-phase, new banners showed quotes of what the spokespersons said, and the presentations were discussed, interpreted, and evaluated in the studio, confirming the importance of the event and the position of the spokespersons as national leaders and experts.

The four phases of the genre and the multimodal constitution of urgency and ethos

Through the examination of the material, four distinctive phases emerged: arrival, presentation, interaction (Q&A), and closing. These phases are not particular to this specific genre but are valid for all types of press conferences. In practice, not all press conferences go through all phases. Some press conferences, for instance, avoid questions, and thus do not have an interaction part.

The phases necessarily happen in the ordered sequence, with only a theoretical possibility for reordering the presentation and interaction phases. The phases each have their distinct objectives and characteristics. In the justifying crisis press conference, the phases of arrival and presentation are the most watched and are central in the constitution of ethos and expertise. This is the case because the authorities are in control of the staging of the events.

The first phase, arrival, may seem obvious and superfluous to examine, since speakers must necessarily arrive at the press conference. However, arriving can be done in various ways and with different rhetorical significance. For the justifying press conferences in the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is particularly relevant, since these events had several speakers, which allowed for rhetorical manipulation of their arrival. Even though this chapter examines Scandinavian press conferences, it is informative to compare them with the rhetoric of arrival at the press conferences of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. At the first press conference on 16 March, reporters in the White House

Press Room waited for the press conference to start. Then, the door slid open and six members of the task force came in and moved towards the only podium, with two people on the right and four on the left of the podium, standing in a rather disorderly group. Then, they waited in silence. Thirty seconds later, the door slid open again and President Trump entered followed by Vice President Pence. The president walked to the podium and put down a folder, while the vice president edged in between the task force members, causing movements and uneasy bodily adaption behind the president. The same occurred on the press conference the next day (17 March). This time, seven people arrived and waited one minute before the president entered.

In contrast to such split arrival, it is characteristic for the Danish press conferences that all participants arrive at the same time.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot from Danish prime minister's press conference on DR1 announcing first lockdown in Denmark, 11 March 2020



Source: DR, 2020

At the meetings on 6 March and 11 March, for instance, reporters waited in front of five podiums all marked with the logo of the prime minister's office, and the background wall displayed the same logo in large format. At the exact announced time for the start of the press conference on 11 March, the prime minister, Mette Fredriksen, arrived with representatives for the health authorities, police, and government. She walked directly to the centre podium and waited until the other participants were at their podiums and ready. On her right stood the minister of health, Magnus Heunicke, and the director general

of The Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, and on her left, the national police commissioner, Thorkild Fogde, and the state secretary of ministry of foreign affairs, Erik Brøgger Rasmussen.

While the split arrival of the American press conference underscores the importance of the president and puts less emphasis on the urgency of the situation, the united arrival of the Danish authorities underscores the urgency of the situation and puts less emphasis on the importance of the prime minister. The united arrival of a full team of senior authorities of the major national functions clearly constitutes an urgent situation and demonstrates a united response.

The Danish press conference also displayed internal power in a more subtle way. Hierarchy was established through the prime minister literally walking in front and arriving first (sequence). In both Scandinavia and the US, the leader moves to the centre (centring), thereby signifying importance and hierarchy. Still, compared to the US, the Scandinavian display of hierarchy was toned down in several ways. Even though the prime ministers or the leading health authority experts walked in first, they still arrived simultaneously with the other participants. After arrival, the prime minister was placed at the most centre podium; however, all podiums were similar and aligned the participants in a way that provided equality. The American press conferences only had one podium, which placed the president both in the centre and in front of the other participants.

The Danish and the American way of arriving, then, display two different ideologies: The American arrival signals clear hierarchy and superiority of the president, while the Danish arrival more subtly signals a hierarchy, but simultaneously equalises it through a less marked sequence (arriving as a group) and a visual alignment (of the podiums). With all the authoritative representatives arriving at the same time, the Danish arrival also signals unity and teamwork. Thus, the arrival and subsequent placing of the Danish authorities serves not primarily to signify the importance of the prime minister, but especially to signify the importance of the issue, the urgency, and the unity to combat the challenges facing the Danish society. At the Danish press conference on 11 March 2020, for instance, the parading of representatives of four central authorities, in addition to the prime minister, made it obvious that the situation was urgent. The fact that the national police commissioner wore his uniform visually adds to the sense of seriousness.

Like Denmark, Norway is considered a highly egalitarian country. Thus, it is peculiar to notice that the arrival at the Norwegian press conference on 12 March began similarly to the American arrival.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot from Norwegian prime minister's press conference on NRK announcing first lockdown in Norway, 12 March 2020



Source: NRK, 2020

The rhetoric of the *mise-en-scène* of the Norwegian press conference was like the Danish, with several podiums for the participants. On the centre podium and at the back wall, the audience could see the national coat of arms and the writing “The Prime Minister’s Office”. In contrast to the Danish arrival, the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, entered the scene alone and immediately moved to the centre podium. She stood a moment, letting reporters find their places, and then delivered her speech. Upon finishing the speech, Solberg said: “And then the minister of health will guide you through the specific measures that have been decided today”. The minister then arrived and walked to the podium to the right of the prime minister. When he finished, the prime minister said, “And then I give the word to the director of the Norwegian Directorate of Health”. The director, Bjørn Guldvog, then arrived and delivered his remarks. Finally, the same happened with the representative for the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Camilla Stoltenberg. Even though the representatives arrived one at the time, beginning with the prime minister (thereby positioning her more clearly as the main authority) the rhetoric of the arrival and *mise-en-scène* still signified urgency and unison among the responsible authorities. This was primarily done through the alignment of podiums and the allotted speaking time for the three other representatives.

The press conference of the Swedish authorities on 11 March followed the same mode in the rhetoric of arrival (see Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). Here as well, the logo of the government was obvious on the four podiums

and the back wall. Like Norway, there were four podiums, but like Denmark, the representatives – the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, the minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, the minister of justice, Morgan Johansson, and the national police chief, Anders Thornberg – arrived at the same time. Notably, in contrast to the Danish and Norwegian press conferences, no representatives from the health authorities were present. Instead, the minister of justice informed about advice given earlier the same day by the Public Health Agency of Sweden. While the Norwegian and Danish press conferences visually demonstrated that the health authorities and the political authorities stand side-by-side, the Swedish press conferences practically separated these two institutions. In Sweden, the absence of politicians at the health authority press conferences as well as the absence of health representatives at the political press conferences is a clear signal of the social division of administrative labour in the Swedish handling of Covid-19 (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). Thus, while the appeals at the press conferences in the three Scandinavian countries were similar, the separation of competencies was visually manifest in Sweden. The press conferences by state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and the Public Health Agency demonstrated medical expertise (Hartelius, 2011) through competence in epidemiology and basing forecasts and recommendations on scientific knowledge and evidence; the press conferences with politicians demonstrated political expertise through competence in practical matters and knowledge about the core of the nation as well as proper recognition of those “whose voice should be heard” (Hartelius, 2011: 16). The separation also constrained the possible displays of hierarchy. Had the Swedish state epidemiologist participated in the press conferences with the political leadership, he would have had to be placed in a sequence of importance when given the chance to speak. As it was, he remained largely free of such hierarchy by being given separate press conferences.

So, already the arrival and order of speech signifies urgency, importance, and hierarchy. This is also done through the formal and highly structured fashion of the events, the many representatives for the authorities, the separation of forms of expertise, and through the construction of the *mise-en-scène* as a formal, national place of importance. Adding to this is the presence of an interpreter for the deaf in the Danish and Norwegian briefings, making it clear that it was essential that every citizen receive the message from the authorities.

Before the authorities uttered a word, the multimodal arrival infused the situation with an importance that helped establish the perception of urgency, preparing the ground for the public to acquiesce to the advice and measures from the authorities (Hartelius, 2011). In the same way, the arrival formed the initial ethos (McCroskey, 2001; McCroskey & Young, 1981) of the authorities as in control, determined, and well prepared, despite the uncertain situation. This multimodally communicated ethos and sense of urgency in the arrival was immediately given substance in the remarks and speeches of the press conferences.

All the press conferences began with the the remarks of the main political representative for the presentation phase. In all instances the representatives read their remarks from a prepared manuscript, which underlines the seriousness and urgency. After the arrival at the Danish press conference on 11 March, the Danish prime minister waited a moment to make sure that everyone was at their podiums and ready to begin before starting her speech. With approximately 1,800 words, the speech was long in comparison with the average of speeches in crisis press conferences. The urgency and seriousness enacted in the arrival was immediately verbalised in her first words, delivered in a calm, firm, and insisting tone of voice, restrained body language, and no hand gestures:

What I will say tonight will have major consequences for every Dane. A lot of citizens will meet very difficult situations, and we need to help each other. Before I get to that, I would like to start by addressing the situation we are looking at now, and the background for this. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020)

The speech was similar to those of national leaders when war has been declared and leaders must unite the nation and take precautions. However, there was no explicit use of war rhetoric. Instead, the prime minister talked about “giant consequences”, “difficult” and “extraordinary” situations, and possible “solutions”. Rhetorically, the speech performed three main tasks: It established the dire and threatening situation, informed about the measures to counter it, and constituted the nation as a community that would stand together and act in unison to counter the crisis.

The speech of the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, on 12 March was much shorter, with only around 800 words, since she left it to the minister of health to describe in detail the measures the government and parliament decided. Like the Danish prime minister, Solberg delivered her words calmly, in a slow tempo with clear pauses and restrained body language. She said in her introduction:

Dear everyone, we are in a difficult time for Norway and the world. Norway is tested. Both as a society, and as individuals. In this period, we will all have a different everyday life. The drastic measures we now implement are done in the hope that we may stop the virus. The coronavirus spreads rapidly. It brings fear and horror to children and adults. I understand that fear. (Government of Norway, 2020)

After establishing the seriousness of the situation, and mentioning some of the main measures, the prime minister verbally constituted the national unity needed to address the urgency:

We stand together in this period – not with hugs and handshakes – but by keeping distance. This will require a lot of each of us. We need to care for each other and help each other as best we can. We have made it through difficult times before – and I am absolutely certain that we will make it again. (Government of Norway, 2020)

At the Swedish press conference on 11 March, on the day of the first Covid-19 casualty, the Swedish prime minister began his speech by extending his commiseration to the bereaved. He then immediately went on to say, “The risk of general dissemination of the virus is high. Tonight, the WHO has declared the coronavirus a pandemic. We have a very serious situation” (SVT, 2020). He said that the fight against the virus had been the top priority of the government and the nation since February and assured that the nation stood together in the difficult time. Then the prime minister gave thanks to the health workers – the many men and women in the whole nation making important efforts to combat the virus and take care of the sick. He informed that he met the leaders of the other parties in parliament and “listened to their contributions and viewpoints”.

As we see from these three examples, the primary speech is not as much an informative piece of rhetoric as it is a national alarm, a call to action, and a constitution of urgency and national unity. The prime minister set the stage, and the minister of health informed about the situation and the measures taken. In declining order of importance, the remaining representatives informed about the situation in their area of responsibility. In all three countries, the political authorities presented first, then the health authorities, and finally, in Denmark and Sweden, the police authorities.

As mentioned, the Swedish division of social labour led to the health authorities and the political authorities giving different press conferences. Thus, the state epidemiologist was not present at the main press conferences with the prime minister. Furthermore, the Swedish prime minister was the only Scandinavian prime minister who gave an individual press conference (on 22 March 2020). In this way, the Swedish separation of responsibility, power, and knowledge was visually expressed in the presence and absence of actors at the different presentations. In contrast to this, the director general of the Danish health authority was frequently present to deliver information. At the press conference on 11 March, for instance, he was the third to talk after the two most important speakers: the prime minister and the minister of health. At the Norwegian press conference on 12 March, the political is represented by two persons: the prime minister and the minister of health. The medical is also represented by two persons: the leader of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the leader of the Norwegian Directorate of Health. Still, the visual representation of these four authorities indicated primacy of the political, since they were placed in the centre with the health representatives on either side.

The use of props and presentation tools

Generally, the examined press conferences did not use any form of presentation tools or props. Using such technology tends to put the communicator in the dark – literally. By leading audiences to slides instead of the speaker, the use of programs such as PowerPoint tend to tone down the leadership of the communicator and undermine the sense of urgency (Kjeldsen et al., 2019). In a crisis, it has a stronger rhetorical effect when the national leader looks the citizens in the eyes than it would have if the same leader had used the instructional style of PowerPoint.

On 24 February 2020, for instance, a Swedish press conference used slides to inform about the situation at that point (see Figure 5.3 for an example).

Figure 5.3 Slide from Swedish press conference, 24 February 2020



Comments: The slide show, given by Lena Hallengren, shows the national preparedness and tasks for different national institutions.

Source: Regeringskansliet, 2020

The minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, and the minister for international development cooperation, Peter Eriksson, informed about the situation in the world and in Sweden as well as how the government was prepared to meet coming challenges (see Figure 5.4). Hallengren said:

We thought that we should provide an account of the present situation in relation to the new coronavirus and the sicknesses that it causes, which has been given the name Covid-19. I want to begin with an image, and briefly

go through what the preparedness of the Swedish government in relation to Covid-19 looks like. (Regeringskansliet, 2020)

Figure 5.4 Screenshot from press conference with Swedish minister of health and social affairs and minister for international development cooperation, 24 February 2020



Comments: The image shows Lena Hallengren, Swedish minister of health and social affairs, and Peter Eriksson, Swedish minister for international development cooperation.

Source: Regeringskansliet, 2020

In the room, the image was displayed on a screen placed to the right of the ministers, which meant that it could not be seen on screen when the ministers were talking: When Hallengren presented the first slide, it filled the whole screen in the broadcast, and we could no longer see the ministers.

The slide had a map of Sweden on the right side, and on the left, it had several bullet points showing which units – the government, the Public Health Agency, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the different regions in Sweden – were responsible for which tasks. Without seeing her, the audience could hear the minister talk about issues not directly related to the slide, then the slide was removed. The minister appeared to be using a fair amount of “fresh talk” (Goffman, 1981) and attending only partly to her notes. A good minute later, she returned to the issues on the slide, and the slide was presented on the television screen again. She continued her informative speech, and another slide came up. When the minister for international development cooperation spoke, another slide was presented. The whole press conference was held in an

informative style focusing on facts and actions. There was no emphasising the seriousness of the threat, no direct address to the citizens, and no constitution of a national “we”, the way it was later done in the press conferences in March. These press conferences – as with almost all the press conferences involving political authorities during the pandemic – were performed without the use of any kind of presentation tools.

In general, the spoken word formed as a prepared speech is the preferred rhetorical form for crisis situations that require communication of urgency, cooperation, collective action, and identity. Thus, using presentation tools implicitly signifies an informative genre, while abstaining from such tools carries with it a sense of more urgency and explicit leadership (Kjeldsen, 2021). This is demonstrated in the press conferences that used a simple placard instead of complicated slides, such as the Danish press conference on 11 March (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5 Television frame from DR1 broadcast, 11 March 2020



Comments: The image shows Magnus Heunicke, the Danish minister of health, presenting a placard with a graph entitled “Flattening the curve”.

Source: DR, 2020

The Danish prime minister introduced the minister of health, Magnus Heunicke, who then informed about the situation in Denmark, which was, at that point, the country with the most dramatic increase of people infected with Covid-19: “We are at the foot of the epidemic. The coronavirus has been seeded in our society. Therefore, what we do now is critical in relation to how the develop-

ment will be in the coming weeks and months” (Danish Prime Minister’s Office, 2020). The minister of health then grabbed a placard from his podium (see Figure 5.5) and said: “And now I would like to show these two graphs” (Danish Prime Minister’s Office, 2020), showing the image of “flattening the curve”. This chart was used in several countries (A *New York Times* article describes the chart; see Roberts, 2020) and shows a red curve signifying an overstraining of the healthcare system capacity and a green (or blue) curve demonstrating how protective measures would flatten the curve. The chart was used because it offered a mode of communication that was more expedient in explaining than verbal language alone. The minister continued, while his finger traced the curves:

We have two possibilities – two scenarios here in Denmark. One scenario is a steep rise in infection. We have already begun to see a steep rise. If this steep rise continues, then the rise in the number of infected continues here.

While following the red curve with his index finger above the crossed line, he said:

It will then break through the normal capacity of the National Health Service. What does this mean? It means that the cancer sections, the sections for heart diseases, the sections for pulmonary medicine, sections for children, will be brought down.

Thus, it is critical, he said, while pointing at the placard,

that we enter into the green scenario, the other curve here, where we with the arrangements we now implement [...] do not have the drastic rise but come into the green scenario. [...] If we do that, then we will avoid what we have witnessed in the Italian health service.

In contrast to the slides of the Swedish minister, the placard is simple, easy to understand, and the Danish minister directed the understanding of the meaning both with his words and voice and by pointing and touching the relevant places on the placard directly. Thereby, he not only provided information, but he also signified the importance and urgency of the situation. After having explained the graph, he held the placard with both hands, looked up at the audience while rhythmically “beating” the placard in time with his words: “We have in Denmark a health crisis, it is ourselves who determine how we get through this health crisis”.

Conclusion

My analysis of the press conferences in the early period of the Covid-19 crisis has provided several results.

First, it has established a specific genre – the justifying press conference – described its phases, and pointed to the importance of mediated framing by the news media. In the media landscape of today, the press conference as a genre is constituted partly by being mediated by legacy media. The framing by the news broadcasters and the multimodal representation during the press conferences work in unison to establish a rhetoric of importance and national urgency.

Second, it has demonstrated how dominant multimodal elements and modes of communication in the genre (verbal speech, physical movement, positioning of spokespersons, props, and slides) contribute to constituting both the urgency of the situation and the ethos for the authorities (the spokespersons). The elements and modes work together to establish a rhetoric of urgency, which constitutes the spokespersons as legitimate leaders and endows them with authority. Their use of carefully prepared remarks support this, while the use of “fresh talk” and slides offers less sense of urgency and leadership. Modes such as movement and positioning also create distinctions between spokespersons establishing hierarchies of importance, which – especially in Denmark and Norway – promotes the political leadership.

In relation to this, the verbal and nonverbal rhetoric of the delivered speeches work in unity to create both a common national exigence and simultaneously constitute the nation as a unified agent that acknowledges the crisis and is prepared to contribute to a common national endeavour. This constitutive national rhetoric makes the appeal of the justifying press conference in a crisis different from other types of crises press conferences.

Further studies should examine in more detail the genre traits of the justifying press conference and study how the multimodal rhetoric of this genre varies in different stages of the crisis. The constitution of urgency and legitimacy is natural in the first phase, where authorities for the first time acknowledged through rhetoric and active measures the severity of the crisis. This led to higher levels of institutional and interpersonal trust (e.g., Esaiasson et al., 2021). Some research has argued that lockdown measures generated political support and legitimacy for measures and authorities, while others have argued that the intensity of the pandemic and the collective angst made people rally around political institutions (Schraff, 2021). While both these points are reasonable, I suggest that measures are not automatically accepted, and angst is not a reaction to bare realities. Acceptance and worries are constructed through the rhetorical constitution of the urgency of the situation and the legitimacy of the authorities. In the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I have shown, the authorities did this though the multimodal ensemble of the justifying press

conference, creating a narrative that the media participated in. Naturally, other kinds of communication contributed to this as well. Together, these appeals prepared the ground for a national understanding of the Covid-19 crisis and the communication that followed. This communication rhetorically worked from the foundation of the constitution of situation and authorities that was created in this early phase (see more about the phases in Mølster & Kjeldsen, 2022).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elisabeth Hoff-Clausen for insightful comments that helped improve the chapter.

References

- Aristotle. (2004). *Rhetoric*. [W. Rhys Roberts, Trans.]. Dover Publications.
- Arnheim, R. (1974). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye* (50th anniversary ed.). University of California Press
- Arnheim, R. (1982). *The power of the center: A study of composition in the visual arts*. University of California Press.
- Arnheim, R. (1997). *Visual thinking* (35th anniversary ed.). University of California Press.
- Bateman, J. A., Wildfeuer, J., & Hiippala, T. (2017). *Multimodality: Foundations, research and analysis: A problem-oriented introduction*. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110479898>
- Baumlin, J. S., & Scisco, P. L. (2018). Ethos and its constitutive role in organizational rhetoric. In Ø. Ihlen, & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *The handbook of organizational rhetoric and communication* (pp. 201–213). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119265771.ch14>
- Bitzer, L. F. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1(1), 1–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40236733>
- Bitzer, L. F. (1980). Functional communication: A situational perspective. In E. White (Ed.), *Rhetoric in transition: Studies in the nature and uses of rhetoric* (pp. 21–38). Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Bjørkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Villadsen, L., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidaritatem: Rhetorical leadership strategies in Scandinavia during Covid-19. In M. Lewis, E. Goven-der, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating Covid-19* (pp. 163–184). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Campbell, K. K., & Jamieson, K. H. (1978). Form and genre in rhetorical criticism: An introduction. In K. K. Campbell, & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action* (pp. 9–32). Speech Communication Association.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203014936>
- Danish Prime Minister's Office. (2020). *Pressemøde om Covid-19 den 11. marts 2020* [Press conference on Covid-19 on 11 March 2020] [Press conference]. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>
- DR. (2020, March 11). The Danish prime minister's press conference announcing first lockdown in Denmark [DR1 broadcast].
- Demir, Y. (2016). Maneuvering strategically in a press conference to diminish political responsibility for a critical event: The case of the soma mine disaster. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 5(2), 191–217. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jaic.5.2.07dem>
- Ekström, M., & Eriksson, G. (2017). Press conferences. In R. Wodak, & B. Forchtner (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and politics* (pp. 342–354). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315183718>
- Eriksson, G. (2011). Follow-up questions in political press conferences. *Journal of Pragmatics*,

- 43(14), 3331–3344. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.07.004>
- Eriksson, G., & Eriksson, M. (2012). Managing political crisis: an interactional approach to “image repair”. *Journal of Communication Management*, 16(3), 264–279. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13632541211245776>
- Esaiasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from ‘the Swedish experiment’. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Gabrielsen, J., Jønch-Clausen, H., & Pontoppidan, C. (2017). Answering without answering: Shifting as an evasive rhetorical strategy. *Journalism*, 21(9), 1355–1370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917738412>
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2020, March 11). *Pressträff med statsministern [Press meeting with the Prime Minister]*. <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/03/presstraff-med-statsministern/>
- Government of Norway. (2020). Statsministerens innledning på pressekonferanse om nye tiltak mot koronasmitte [The prime minister’s introduction to the press conference on new measures against the coronavirus]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/taler-og-innlegg/statsministeren/talerogartikler/2020/statsministerens-innledning-pa-pressekonferanse-om-nye-tiltak-mot-koronasmitte/id2693335/>
- Hartelius, E. J. (2011). *The rhetoric of expertise*. Lexington Books.
- Helsingen, L. M., Refsum, E., Gjøstein, D. K., Løberg, M., Bretthauer, M., Kalager, M., & Emilsen, L. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Norway and Sweden – threats, trust, and impact on daily life: A comparative survey. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1597. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09615-3>
- Hernández, A. (2021). Journalists’ moves in political press conferences and their implications for accountability. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 10(3), 281–314. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jaic.20005.her>
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Á. Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669>
- Jewitt, C. (2017). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Just, M. R., Saraceno, J., & Crigler, A. N. (2021). Presidential home style: Trump in the era of Covid-19. *The forum: A journal of applied research in contemporary politics*, 18(3), 347–366. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2020-2013>
- Kjeldsen, J. E. (2018). Visual and multimodal rhetoric and argumentation in organizations and organizational theory. In Ø. Ihlen, & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *The handbook of organizational rhetoric and communication* (pp. 359–372). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kjeldsen, J. E. (2021). The rhetoric of digital presentation tools in politics: The case of visual knowledge in president Obama’s enhanced state of the union. *Design Issues*, 37(4), 86–102. https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00660
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Kiewe, A., Lund, M., & Barnholdt Hansen, J. (2019). Writing for the eye: Pictures, visions, and PowerPoint. In J. E. Kjeldsen, A. Kiewe, M. Lund, & J. B. Hansen (Eds.), *Speechwriting in theory and practice* (pp. 145–163). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03685-0_10
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Expert uncertainty: Arguments bolstering the ethos of expertise in situations of uncertainty. In S. Oswald, M. Lewiński, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The pandemic of argumentation* (pp. 85–103). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4>
- Kress, G. (2017). What is a mode. In C. Jewitt (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (pp. 60–75). Routledge.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kumar, M. J. (2003). Source material: “Does this constitute a press conference?” Defining and tabulating modern presidential press conferences. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 33(1),

- 221–237. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552471>
- Kumar, M. J. (2005). “Source material”: Presidential press conferences: The importance and evolution of an enduring forum. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35(1), 166–192. www.jstor.org/stable/27552665
- Larsson, L. (2012). From yearly to daily press meetings: The development of the government press relations in Sweden. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1(3), 257–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X12448586>
- McCroskey, J. C. (2001). *An introduction to rhetorical communication* (8th ed.). Allyn and Bacon.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Young, T. J. (1981). Ethos and credibility: The construct and its measurement after three decades. *Central States Speech Journal*, 32(1), 24–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978109368075>
- Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(2), 151–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>
- Mølster, R., & Kjeldsen, J. E. (2022). Information films as rhetorical responses during the Covid-19 crisis. *Journal of Visual Political Communication* 9(1), 29–58. https://doi.org/10.1386/jvpc_00016_1
- NRK. (2020, March 12). Norwegian prime minister’s press conference announcing first lockdown in Norway [NRK broadcast].
- Regeringskansliet [Government Offices of Sweden]. (2020, February 24). *Pressträff med anledning av coronaviruset* [Press meeting due to the coronavirus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m32N1phjn3c>
- Roberts, S. (2020, March 27). Flattening the coronavirus curve. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/flatten-curve-coronavirus.html>
- Schraff, D. (2021). Political trust during the Covid-19 pandemic: Rally around the flag or lockdown effects? *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(4), 1007–1017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12425>
- SVT. (2020, March 11). The Swedish prime minister’s press conference announcing first lockdown in Sweden [SVT broadcast].
- van Eemeren, F. H. (2010). *Strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse: Extending the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation* (Vol. 2). John Benjamins.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics: An introductory textbook*. Routledge.
- Vatz, R. E. (1973). The myth of the rhetorical situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6(3), 154–161. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40236848>
- Vigso, O. (2017). The visual construction of personal ethos in election posters. *The Poster*, 4(1–2), 31–57. https://doi.org/10.1386/post.4.1-2.31_1
- Warnick, B., & Heineman, D. S. (2012). *Rhetoric online: The politics of new media* (2nd ed.). Peter Lang.
- Wodak, R., Culpeper, J., & Semino, E. (2021). Shameless normalisation of impoliteness: Berlusconi’s and Trump’s press conferences. *Discourse & Society*, 32(3), 369–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977217>
- Wu, P. (2019a). Confrontational maneuvering by dissociation in spokespersons’ argumentative replies at the press conferences of China’s ministry of foreign affairs. *Argumentation*, 33(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-018-09477-5>
- Wu, P. (2019b). “I have no comment”: Confrontational maneuvering by declaring a stand-point unallowed or indisputable in spokespersons’ argumentative replies at the regular press conferences of China’s ministry of foreign affairs. *Argumentation*, 33(4), 489–519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-019-09504-z>

Expressions of governance, risk, and responsibility

Public campaigns in the crisis and risk management of Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Pernille Almlund,^I Jens E. Kjeldsen,^{II}
& Ragnhild Mølster^{II}

^IDepartment of Communication and Art, Roskilde University, Denmark

^{II}Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, public campaigns were an important part of the Scandinavian health authorities' strategies to combat the spread of the virus. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden had different strategies to manage the crisis: Denmark had the most political crisis management, Sweden the most informational, and Norway was placed somewhere in between. This chapter examines how public risk and crisis communication during a pandemic was handled in these campaigns in the Scandinavian countries, how they function as a governance technology, and how this was carried out rhetorically. We show how indirect, governmental steering dominated the campaign rhetoric in Scandinavia, through a focus on the culturally decided aspects of purity and danger, and through appeal to a sense of personal responsibility and willingness to avoid taking risks among the citizenry. Furthermore, we find that the campaigns are representative for the crisis management strategy in each country.

Keywords: public campaigns, governmentality, risk management, Covid-19, rhetoric of solidarity

Almlund, P., Kjeldsen, J. E., & Mølster, R. (2023). Expressions of governance, risk, and responsibility: Public campaigns in the crisis and risk management of Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 121–147). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-6>

Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the health authorities in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden persistently used public campaigns, ranging from simple, instructive campaigns to more complex, motivational campaigns. Some had a humorous twist, some focused on memories from before Covid-19, and some contained an appeal for public participation. Importantly, all these public campaigns contained a risk perspective (Almlund et al., 2020).

Campaigns are a specific genre within public communication and they epitomise health authorities' communications with the public. Usually, health authorities' messages are directed at relatively broad target groups, and campaigns are assumed to be the most cost-effective communication channel for addressing the public. The campaigns launched as part of the Scandinavian health authorities' crisis communication and crisis management strategies are no exception to this policy. However, due to their importance, these campaigns should not only reach a relatively broad target group – they should communicate with the public as a whole. Even though some messages are aimed at target groups and specific communication arenas, the most fundamental messages target the entire population.

Although public campaigns had a massive presence during the pandemic in all three Scandinavian countries, the strategies of crisis management (which influenced the campaigns' performance) differed between informational and political perspectives (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). In this chapter, we show that Denmark demonstrated the most political form of crisis management, Sweden the most informational, and Norway was placed somewhere in between.

In the three countries, the rhetoric of political authorities appealed to solidarity (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). As we show in the analyses, such discursive norms were rhetorically activated in our empirical material. In Denmark, this was performed especially by the prime minister through appeals to civic mindedness, in Sweden through duty and voluntariness, and in Norway through the concept of *dugnad*. To achieve *dugnad* means that all should participate voluntarily and on equal terms to help one's community, and as such, it is an "appeal to Norwegian identity and community sentiment" (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021: 173).

Generally, we assume that the campaigns were successful in all three countries. This assumption is based on two facts: The citizenry appropriated the measures recommended in the campaigns to a very high degree, and they exhibited a high degree of trust in the health authorities during the campaigns (Esaiaasson et al., 2021; Helsingen et al., 2020). In all three countries, trust in the authorities was (and continues to be) remarkably high compared with other Western countries (Warren et al., 2021). This is in accordance with the tradition of Scandinavian countries being high trust societies (European Social Survey, 2018) (for a discussion of how this tradition of high trust in the Nordics

influenced the public's reception of governmental Covid-19 communication, see Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

All the campaigns shared a strategy of motivational governance or governmental steering (Almlund et al., 2020; Foucault, 1982, 1991). In this chapter, we show how this steering was carried out rhetorically. Moreover, we investigate how the campaigns communicated risk perception, since these campaigns could be categorised as risk and crisis communication. In this regard, we also investigate what is perceived to be right (pure) and wrong (danger, or dirt) behaviour, to use the terminology of Douglas (1966, 1992), and the individual's responsibilities and risks compared with the dangers to which we are exposed (Luhmann, 1997, 2008).

In this chapter, we demonstrate how public risk and crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic was handled in the campaigns in Scandinavian countries and how these campaigns function as a governance technology. Thus, we seek to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. How is governance present in the Scandinavian Covid-19 campaigns?
- RQ2. How are risk and responsibility expressed in the campaigns?
- RQ3. Which country-specific strategies are visible in the campaigns, and what are the similarities and differences between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden?

The chapter is divided into four parts. First, we present the context in which the campaigns were carried out. Second, we outline the theoretical approach and explain how the empirical material was selected. Third, we present an analysis of the selected campaigns in the three countries. Finally, we offer reflective concluding remarks.

Context of the campaigns

Any form of crisis and risk communication must deal with uncertainties (see, e.g., Kjeldsen et al., 2022). During the Covid-19 crisis, communication had to address two main types of uncertainty: First, the health authorities needed to address the public's uncertainty or lack of knowledge and provide guidance on how to act, and second, the health authorities themselves were in a position of being unsure of how to address the crisis, except for some basic, important recommendations. These measures and recommendations were then based on previous experience and the countries' pandemic preparedness plans (Andersen & Almlund, 2013; Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Heinrich & Holmes, 2011).

Surprisingly, it is apparent that Covid-19 campaigns seem to not have been studied in the academic literature. Instead, the recommendations and restric-

tions introduced have mainly been analysed in relation to institutions (Bentkowska, 2021; Boswell et al., 2021), politics (Boswell et al., 2021; Grondel, 2021; Triukose et al., 2021), and behavioural changes (Jørgensen et al., 2021). In this chapter, we address this gap by examining how such recommendations were communicated to the public through campaigns.

Risk and crisis communication in the public sector is only rarely theorised in the literature. Thus, Frandsen and Johansen (2020) argued that researchers should focus on communication from public sector organisations. In their understanding of the strategic and communicative differences, they developed three perspectives on public risk and crisis communication. The rationale of the informational perspective is to inform, warn, protect, and secure the safety of the public; crises are defined as emergencies and disasters, and this approach is based on professionalism and consensus, with the intention of communication being to distribute information. In comparison, the political perspective is an internal approach with a rationale to frame, persuade, and define expectations; here, a crisis is simply framed as a crisis, and the key actors are political leaders – hence, the approach is political and agonistic, while the intention is persuasion through rhetorical communication. Finally, the institutional perspective is analytical, with the intention of understanding how crises are institutionalised; hence, the focus is on shared social reality (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

The informational perspective is supported and investigated in research on behavioural change. For example, it is suggested that authorities focus on self-efficacy instead of fear and trust within crisis and risk communication. This was found to be more influential on people's behaviour in the first wave of Covid-19 in seven Western and Northern European countries and the US (Jørgensen et al., 2021). Similarly, Sar and Anghelcev (2012) argued that people's mood is an important factor when attempting to increase the effectiveness of public health service advertisements. Recently, studies of the political aspect of measures, recommendations, and regulations have supported the political perspective (Boswell et al., 2021). Here, Sweden is frequently mentioned in research articles due to its position as an outlier by choosing the more health professional strategy of herd immunity (Grondel, 2021; Triukose et al., 2021).

Grondel (2021) argued that three governance approaches have been employed to effectively combat the pandemic: 1) the cyber-intrusive approach involves the use of cyber technology to “intrude” on citizens' digital privacy, which is a relatively strong surveillance method; 2) the liberty-intrusive approach involves restrictions or mandates that intrude on citizens' liberties, which means that people are encouraged to behave properly without being monitored (Grondel, 2021); and 3) a combination of the first two approaches. Grondel (2021) has described Sweden and the UK as countries that adopted a herd immunity approach, which was not effective in combatting the pandemic. In accordance with the following analysis, Norway and Denmark could be placed in the category of using the liberty-intrusive approach in their response to Covid-19.

Boswell and colleagues (2021) considered Denmark's and the UK's governance responses to Covid-19 as top-down approaches, which they termed "court politics". They highlighted and described the differences between the two countries and arrived at the remarkable conclusion that Denmark (as a consensual democracy) centralised authority in "the Frederiksen court", whereas the UK (as a majoritarian democracy) did not act swiftly or decisively, muddling through the pandemic from the beginning. Here, Denmark is described as having a political and authoritative response strategy.

Bentkowska (2021) adopted an institutional perspective that involved Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, focusing on how formal institutions are dependent on informal institutions (such as unwritten codes of conduct, traditions, behavioural norms, and taboos), which exist independently of the state. The study analyses the link between the countries' restrictions as a measure of formal institutions and the societal response as a measure of informal institutions. Further, Bentkowska revealed that Denmark and Sweden are in the group of countries that have both strong restrictions and strong societal responses, whereas Norway is in the group that has a strong societal response, but with fewer restrictions. Although the countries have similarities (such as strong trust and social ties), the main difference is that formal institutions in Denmark and Sweden have a stronger influence than informal institutions, whereas the opposite is the case in Norway. In Denmark and Sweden, citizens expect the state to take responsibility, whereas in Norway, citizens do not leave all responsibility to the state, going beyond formal rules and acting responsibly on their own initiative (Bentkowska, 2021).

Thus, existing research and our empirical material support our claim that in terms of crisis communication and management, Denmark had the most political approach, Sweden the most informational, and Norway was somewhere in between.

Theoretical approaches and methodology

It is important to consider the background and logic behind the development and launching of the campaigns. This informs our understanding of how the campaigns disseminated non-medical measures, such as advice, demands, and recommendations. Since they were launched with the intention of coping with the crisis and motivating citizens to do the same, the analytical approach focused on risk communication and governance, drawing on three sociological perspectives on risk.

We focus on how the campaigns functioned as a governance strategy through the lens of Foucault's (1982, 1991) concept of governmentality, which focuses specifically on indirect steering – the type of governance conducted by the campaigns. Moreover, we analyse the logic of risk through the theory of Mary

Douglas (1966, 1992) and her concepts of purity and danger, and through the theory of Niklas Luhmann (1997, 2008) and his concept of risk. Since communication of risk is a governmental strategy, according to Foucault (Dean, 2006), we also examine how specific messages about risk can be part of a governance strategy.

The concepts of Foucault and Luhman allow us to focus on individual responsibility. However, Luhman's perspective on personal responsibility versus external danger is more comprehensive when analysing risk perspectives compared with Foucault's more general focus on individual responsibility as an outcome of governmental steering. In contrast, indirect steering is more precise and operational in the Foucauldian perspective. Douglas's definition of risk is sharp and bound to daily activities (Arnoldi, 2009; Lupton, 1999), whereas the Foucauldian and Luhmanian perspectives reflect a more discursive level (Andersen, 1999). Combining these three perspectives provides the opportunity to focus on the discursive level through the descriptions of daily expectations during a pandemic.

Governance and governmentality

As mentioned previously, campaigns can be understood as an indirect governance strategy, compared with a direct governance strategy that is bound by laws. Both strategies have been conducted in relation to Covid-19 as motivational recommendations and legal pandemic regulations, respectively. Although campaigns can be perceived as reminders of regulations, they are mainly motivational recommendations. As such, they take the form of governmental steering. This type of steering is conducted with the ambition of motivating citizens to steer themselves in a specific direction and of establishing a set of specific norms or discourses, which establishes a chain reaction. First, citizens accept and apply the normative direction enacted by the initiators of the campaigns. Then, they become mediators of the norms inherent in government strategies. Accordingly, citizens are an important part of the governmental discipline chain (Foucault, 2008). It is important to acknowledge that governmental steering (according to Foucault) presupposes that free individuals are the basis of modern democracy (Foucault, 1982). For example, while we are legally free to choose whether to cough or sneeze into our sleeves, this is not the case socially or normatively.

According to Foucault, statistics have a strong influence on who is perceived as being at risk, and he further highlighted how statistics have established the idea about risk (Foucault, 2008). Accordingly, risk is part of governmental steering and is connected to the practices and rationalities of governance. Moreover, risk has become a rationality of governmental steering (Dean, 2006) as the focus on risks has increased (Beck, 1997). Because there are multiple practices and rationalities, the perceptions and performances of risk will be equally mul-

multiple and are dependent on actual situations. However, some understandings of risk develop as more dominant than others. Moreover, in a governmental sense, norms will be established regarding what is more or less risky behaviour. However, in accordance with the recommendations of the campaigns, the public should know the dominant norm. This focus on differentiated perceptions of risk is also a core in Douglas's anthropological understanding of risk.

Risk understood through purity and danger/dirt

According to Douglas (1966, 1979), the concepts of purity and danger are a united differentiation between purity and danger, or dirt, meaning that they are not two different concepts. In this sense, purity and danger are each other's preconditions. Douglas understood this differentiation as the most important dichotomy for human thinking because this is the way we establish social order and ensure the survival of society.

Focusing on social order, Douglas underlined culture, differentiation of cultures, and patterns of culture as the outcomes of this continuously functioning dichotomy between purity and danger. Usually, this dichotomy is perceived as the risk concept (Arnoldi, 2009; Lupton, 1999), where purity refers to what we think belongs to our culture and danger and dirt are what we exclude from our culture as being risky. However, what is accepted as pure in one culture can be judged as dirty in another. The differences in people's judgements of Covid-19 vaccines are a clear example of this concept. Douglas (1966: 2) described the idea as follows: "There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder". Striving to understand the specific logic of risk perception, Douglas advised us to be aware of "rituals", "taboos", and "matter out of place", since such aspects expressed during communication can help us to understand which risk perception is at stake.

While it may seem strange to search for rituals in modern contexts such as the Covid-19 crisis, rituals are part of all cultures historically (Douglas, 1966). Still, it may be an analytical challenge to observe and understand the rituals of one's own culture. On this issue, Douglas (1979: 68) wrote: "To the outsider the taboo is irrational, to the believer its rightness needs no explaining". Thus, Douglas understood rituals as a type of affirmative communication that expresses the emotions and conjectures of specific cultural groups. Moreover, it is reproductive in the sense that it upholds social relations and collective morals and values. A taboo is a restriction or prohibition. While this is obvious for the culture (which acts as the taboo prescriber), this obviousness often results in a level where the rightness is unconscious or tacit. Taboos are, like rituals, culturally dependent and culturally supportive. Matter out of place means something that is wrong in specific situations or places (dirty); for example, when some of the Covid-19 campaigns encouraged us to maintain a safe distance of

two meters from others, it was assumed to be a matter out of place if we were closer. In addition, matter out of place is culturally dependent and supports social classification. Despite our blind spots when observing our own culture, the concepts of ritual, taboo, and matter out of place are analytically beneficial when examining risk perceptions in campaigns. As a supplementary approach to the various perceptions of risk, Luhmann (1997, 2008) contributed with a discursive understanding of risk perception that specifically focused on risk, security, and danger.

Risk, security, and danger

The aim of Luhmann's analysis of risk was to uncover which concept is most often differentiated from the concept of risk in the understanding of risk in society. The theoretical foundation of this search is that all concepts are given meaning by the concepts and content of communication from which they are differentiated. When conducting form analysis, it is possible to reveal the denominator of the content and concepts and, subsequently, the logic of the communication of the topic under investigation (Andersen, 1999; Luhmann, 1997). Luhmann (2008) defined risk as differentiated from danger and not (as generally understood) as differentiated from security, and he underlined the importance of both sides in the understanding of risk. Risk is something that we take ourselves, whereas danger is a threat we are exposed to. Even though risk can be expressed through security in campaigns, Luhmann argued that a differentiation between risk and security makes no sense because risk is always oriented towards the future, and there is no certainty of a secure future (Luhmann, 2008). When analysing the campaigns, we searched for expressions of risk and danger and how they were differentiated from each other in communications pertaining to citizens' own responsibilities compared with what exposure citizens encounter.

Empirical material

When selecting our material, we initially examined all the available posters, videos, and other material on the websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels of Scandinavian health authorities: the Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen] (www.sst.dk); the Norwegian Directorate of Health [Helsedirektoratet] (www.helsedirektoratet.no); the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [Folkehelseinstituttet] (www.fhi.no); the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency [Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap] (www.msb.se); and the Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] (www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se). We went through the material in October and November 2021 and looked at more than 115 campaign items in total. An initial hermeneutic analysis revealed two dominant phases in the pandemic: the instruction phase, which was dominated by a rhetoric of information dis-

tribution and instruction, and the perseverance phase, which was dominated by a rhetoric of motivation. We then selected the most salient and widely used examples of communication by the authorities during these two phases, including more than half of the available material on the respective authorities' websites. We also ensured that our selection included both posters (print and online) and videos. It should be noted that the selection of items for such a textual analysis is not meant to be statistically representative; instead, it functions as a foundation for determining the general rhetorical appeals in the material. We then examined the material from the two phases, looking for similarities and differences between the phases and between countries. This interpretative analysis was informed by our theoretical departure points, looking for textual signs and instances of governmentality, purity, and dirt distinctions, as well as risk and danger distinctions. We have translated into English any quotations from our material included in this chapter.

Analysis: Campaign rhetoric in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Closer textual analysis of the selected material supported the previously mentioned phases of instruction and perseverance. The initial campaigns were instructive and informational, whereas the campaigns launched later in 2020 (and afterwards) involved more features and instigated endurance and perseverance, aiming to motivate the public to keep following the established Covid-19 guidelines. The Danish Health Authority was already evaluating the initial campaign in May 2020 and was aware of the necessity of a hold-on strategy (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020b). However, the first campaigns to consider this issue were launched later in 2020. In Norway, there was early pressure from the public to further tighten the already severe restrictions. However, after some months, it was also necessary for Norway to renew its messages and campaigns to maintain public attention and instigate people to hold on.

According to the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, the communicative need in the initial phase was to alarm and raise consciousness. Moreover, the aim of the campaign in this phase was to quickly create a feeling of safety and emphasise the importance of solidarity and responsibility. The slogan was, "Together we can slow down the infection" (Olofson, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, the communicative need was to instigate endurance and perseverance.

Even though campaigns were the epitome of indirect governance and governmentality, we can still search for differences in the degree of indirectness, which could reflect the campaigns' differences in strategy (informational or political). Drawing on Douglas's risk perspectives, we examined how the authorities

expressed what the right thing to do was – and what not to do; hence, what was the correct understanding of risk. With the Luhmanian perspective, we have a strict focus on how the campaigns expressed the expectations of citizens' own responsibilities compared with an expression of the danger to which they were exposed. Regarding these risk perspectives, we focused on how the degree of responsibility expressed in the campaigns and the perception of risk differed between countries. Hence, all three theoretical perspectives revealed differences in the countries' strategies and how they were reflected in the campaigns.

Campaign rhetoric in the initial phase

In the initial and instructive campaigns in Denmark, the textual elements were mostly in imperative form. This was the case in headlines, in sentences that provided good advice, and in sentences that contained appeals to follow the specific mentioned advice. Figure 6.1 depicts two examples of several posters published by the Danish Health Authority in the same format and with the same type of advice. This use of the imperative form implies that the health authorities' ambition was to push the citizenry towards a specific behaviour; however, this advice was not supported by law or subject to penalties. This duality (or contradiction) was found in sentences such as "Protect yourself and others with this good advice" and "Thus, follow this advice" (see Figure 6.1). Using such a duality of imperative form and providing advice suggests governmental steering (Foucault, 1982, 1991). Simultaneously, they aimed to establish norms to follow and initiate a governmental chain reaction of correct behaviour among citizens. We found a clear example of this in a poster for elderly and chronically ill people: "Keep your distance and ask others to be considerate", where the audience was directly asked to function as mediators of change (see Figure 6.1, left).

Figure 6.1 Examples of Danish Health Authority campaign posters



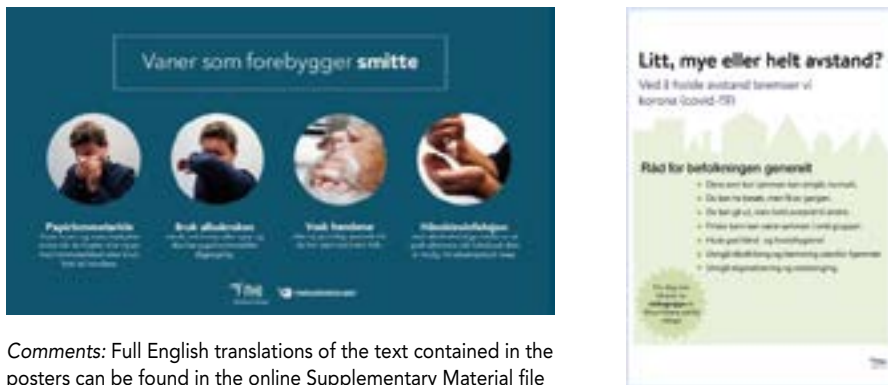
Comments: Full English translations of the text contained in the posters can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Source: Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020a

This initiation of a chain reaction was more directly expressed in the sentences “Protect yourself and others with this good advice” and “If you protect yourself, you are also actively protecting others” (see Figure 6.1). However, more obviously, these sentences express “civic mindedness” because they encourage people to take care of others by taking care of themselves (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021).

In contrast, the most used poster in Norway did not adopt the imperative form in the title, simply stating “Habits that prevent infection” (see Figure 6.2, left). This not only presupposes that there is a virus and that citizens must act accordingly, but that the citizens agree about this. In other words, they are more in need of motivating information than an order. In general, the language was straightforward and in an everyday tone. Only two of the pieces of advice used an imperative form: “use your sleeve” and “wash your hands”. Two other pieces of advice were purely informative by stating “Paper tissue” and “Hand disinfection”, and then explaining how such remedies could best be used to prevent infection.

Figure 6.2 Examples of Norwegian campaign posters



Comments: Full English translations of the text contained in the posters can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Source: Helsedirektoratet, Folkehelseinstituttet, 2022

Another Norwegian poster from late March 2020 (see Figure 6.2, right) referenced the uncertainty prevalent in the early phase by using the title: “A little, a lot, or complete distance? By keeping distance, we slow down corona (Covid-19)”. However, this appears vague in its questioning form, in contrast to the widespread use of imperative statements in the Danish posters. Moreover, the bullet points were formulated as positives rather than prohibitions: People who live together “may socialise normally” and one should “remember good hand hygiene”. Only the two final bullet points used an imperative tone, although in the mild form of “avoid”: “Avoid shaking hands and hugging”, and “Avoid

stigmatisation and exclusion”. Although the Norwegian campaigns were still indirect steering (hence, governmental steering), they used a more inviting and gentle rhetorical tone.

The Swedish posters in this period were generally informational; for instance, the very first poster published on the Public Health Agency of Sweden’s Facebook feed after the novel coronavirus was detected in Wuhan was simply “New coronavirus detected in China” (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020a). Later posters maintained the informational format, with messages like “Stay home when you feel sick” and “Protect the elderly and other risk groups” (see Figure 6.3, left).

In many of the Swedish posters, we see the very same governmental steering through imperative language as in the Danish campaigns. These campaigns served to establish some norms for what was assumed to be risky behaviour and what was perceived as safe (Luhmann, 2008). However, the Swedish health authorities’ methodology for reaching this goal was mainly through information and facts and through an appeal to a sense of solidarity. In particular, the focus on community, solidarity, and responsibility, and the mantra “Together we can slow down the spread of infection” pervaded the Swedish pandemic campaigns.

Figure 6.3 Public Health Agency of Sweden campaign posters



Comments: Full English translations of the text contained in the posters can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Source: Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020b

In March 2020, a video from the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020b) shows how factual aspects were presented, explaining through animations why it was important that as few people as possible were ill at the same time. Then, it asked, “So what can we all do?”, followed by advice on distancing and hygiene, before finishing with the slogan “Together we can slow down the spread of infection”. By referring to science, this built an ethos of expertise and was an exercise from an informational perspective (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). It presented risk as governmental steering (Foucault, 2008),

as the authorities recommended actions and behaviour based on their statistical and general knowledge about the virus and the danger it represented.

Even though the campaigns did not explicitly mention risk, it is clear that they addressed a risk situation both contextually and textually. The campaigns were only necessary because of the need to make the public aware of a dangerous risk: catching the virus. A poster from Sweden (see Figure 6.3, right) shows a pictogram of a woman walking alone, with a tree, a bench, and a bird in the background. Although there is no explicit expression of risk or danger, the imperative form and insistent tone of the text – “Keep a distance!” – communicate an emergency and the importance of the message. Moreover, there is an implication of an underlying risk situation and advice on how to establish safety. This concern about the specific risk of being infected infiltrated all advice and imperative sentences, underlining how risk is a rationality of steering, and the specific rationality of risk perception.

The campaigns contained instructive advice (both informative and imperative) for avoiding the physical contact we usually maintain as social beings, washing or sanitising our hands more often than before, and sneezing and coughing into our sleeves instead of our hands (which have been the usual and right behaviour until then). By giving this advice, the health authorities touched upon ritual, taboo, matter out of place, and to some extent, they disturbed the social and hygienic order.

Washing our hands is a ritual, especially after visiting the bathroom and in other situations where we try to keep bacteria and viruses, which are perceived as dirt, away. It is a ritual because it maintains purity (Douglas, 1966; Lupton, 1999). Moreover, the way we communicate about washing our hands in specific situations is reproductive in the sense that it upholds social relations and collective morals and valuations (Douglas, 1966, 1979). When we are asked to wash our hands more thoroughly and more often, the campaigns built on and reinforced a well-known ritual in our cultures.

We see this element of ritual present in “This is how you wash your hands” posters (see Figure 6.4 for a Swedish example), where both informational and ritual traits are reinforced in the posters’ detailed description on how to proceed. While people might have thought that they already knew how to wash their hands, these posters claim to display the right way. In other words, washing your hands differently could imply risk (Douglas, 1992). The aim of reinforcing ritual hand washing was to enact the taboo of not washing hands. Accordingly, the campaigns attempted to reinforce rituals and articulate taboos (Douglas, 1979).

Figure 6.4 Swedish campaign poster detailing proper hand-washing techniques



Comments: The poster says “This is how you wash your hands. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds”.
Source: Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020c

The campaigns in all three countries not only attempted to reinforce our established hygiene rituals, they also introduced new hygienic actions, such as asking us not to cough or sneeze into our hands. Here, the bacteria and viruses on our hands become matter out of place. Further, because we are unable to see them, they are assumed to be there, meaning the action of coughing and sneezing into our hands would be matter out of place (Douglas, 1966). Moreover, it would be a matter out of place if we were too close to other people, as the campaigns advised us to “keep a distance”. One example of this was the Norwegian poster campaigns that used photographs to demonstrate how people should act, placing the audience directly in front of the threat of the virus. Seeing the images of the man in the picture sneeze into a paper tissue and cough into his sleeve demonstrated how to deal with sputum and cough in a new manner, and thus avoid matter out of place (see Figure 6.2, left). Taken together, our hands played an extraordinary role in the campaigns’ pandemic advice, and hence, in the Scandinavian health authorities’ idea of prevention. The new demand that our hands should not touch others placed everyone in a situation in which their hands were at risk of becoming matter out of place.

The health authorities also introduced new social norms, such as when the Danish campaigns advised the elderly and chronically ill to “Avoid unnecessary physical contact – remember it is okay to say no to social gatherings” (see Figure 6.1, left). They underlined how it is acceptable to say no to social invitations for no reason other than the pandemic. When people were advised

to remember this new social norm, it could be perceived as raising a warning finger, indicating that it should be an acceptable new norm to say no to social gatherings (Foucault, 1982).

As mentioned previously, the citizenry of all three countries were addressed by these campaigns because they were all at risk, or in danger of infection (Luhmann, 1997, 2008). The question is whether the health authorities, through the campaigns' advice, were holding the citizens responsible for avoiding the risk of being infected or were simply warning the public about the danger of being infected. The campaigns gave the impression that both risk and danger were at stake. Furthermore, danger was communicated by naming the virus "new coronavirus", since what is new is unknown, and nobody was given responsibility for this new virus – or the situation – in the campaigns. Moreover, the Danish poster directed at the elderly expressed danger when it stated, "You are particularly exposed to infection with the new coronavirus and should be very careful" (see Figure 6.1, left). It should be noted that the poster did not say that the elderly and chronically ill were *responsible* for being particularly exposed, as the new coronavirus presented a danger to all; however, the information is ambiguous since the elderly and chronically ill were being held responsible for careful behaviour in order not to be infected. Moreover, they were expected to take responsibility for being preventive, which means that the health authorities assumed that they may act carelessly, thereby running the risk of being infected. The poster and the photographs presented a possible threat while simultaneously illustrating how citizens could exercise individual responsibility and turn it into a controllable risk if they did as they were advised in the campaign, for example, "Wash your hands often or use hand sanitiser" and "Avoid shaking hands, kissing, and hugging – limit physical contact" (see Figure 6.1). Accordingly, the campaigns offered agency and responsibility to the public and turned the threat of the virus into a personal risk (Luhmann, 2008).

A Norwegian video published on 8 April 2020 shows a montage of the most popular YouTubers in Norway talking directly to the camera, encouraging everyone to contribute to curbing the virus by saying, "We all carry a responsibility. A good Norwegian *dugnad*, where everybody contributes" (the latter sentence is depicted in Figure 6.5). As an activity and concept, *dugnad* can be considered a Norwegian cultural ritual that activates norms, values, and the enforcement of individual responsibility.

Figure 6.5 Screenshot from a Norwegian Directorate of Health campaign video



Comments: Full English translations of the text contained in the video can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Source: Helsedirektoratet, Folkehelseinstituttet, 2022

Following these traditional and now reinforced rituals pushed the citizens from threat to risk. This use of “dugnad” was reinforced by most of the Norwegian campaigns, as they were constructed as citizen-to-citizen rhetoric, presenting Norwegians as people who stand together and work in unison in a voluntary communal way (see also Figure 6.2, left).

Although the concepts of risk and security were not mentioned in any of the countries’ campaigns, the focus on preventive advice was an attempt to place responsibility primarily on the citizens themselves. In accordance with this experience, the differentiation of risk and danger is, as Luhmann (1997, 2008) defined, still more telling of the risk communication in these campaigns than the differentiation between risk and security.

Campaign rhetoric in the perseverance phases

As the Covid-19 pandemic progressed, the Scandinavian health authorities needed to ensure that people did not become more careless and behave riskily. The campaigns remained instructive, such as a Swedish poster with the message, “The pandemic is not over. The situation may change rapidly. Follow the current recommendations” (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021). However, the need to make people continue living life while employing prevention measures demanded more motivational campaigns.

In Denmark, a “We can” campaign was launched on 23 November 2020 with five videos created to induce people to continue the requested behaviour (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020c). One video addressed the population in general, and four were targeted towards young people. The video targeting the general population conveyed a happy tone and was intended as a tribute and encouragement to everyone who was following the recommendations and restrictions.

This video used narrative scenes to show how the new daily Covid-19 routines were disturbed by old habits, forgetfulness, and clumsiness. The videos aimed at the young audience used humour and narratives, each presenting a small and funny story about a restriction or a recommendation. One video shows a young man in the bathroom who coughs, and his mother encourages him to stay home. Although he says he is fine, he looks into the mirror and sees Søren Brostrøm (the director general of the Danish Health Authority) standing behind him with a strict, almost diabolic look. He turns around, and though he sees no one, he decides to stay at home (see Figure 6.6, left).

Figure 6.6 Screenshots from a Danish Health Authority campaign videos



Comments: Full English translations of the transcriptions of the videos depicted in the screenshots can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Source: Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020c

Another video shows four young people laughing in a bar. One of them looks at her watch and says that it is time to go home, and a young man loudly protests and tries to keep the party going. He designates himself as DJ and goes to the jukebox to play some music. The piece of music that plays is Søren Brostrøm singing “Go the hell home, go home and lay down in your bed”. The young man becomes a little shaken and is now eager to stop the party and go home (see Figure 6.6, right).

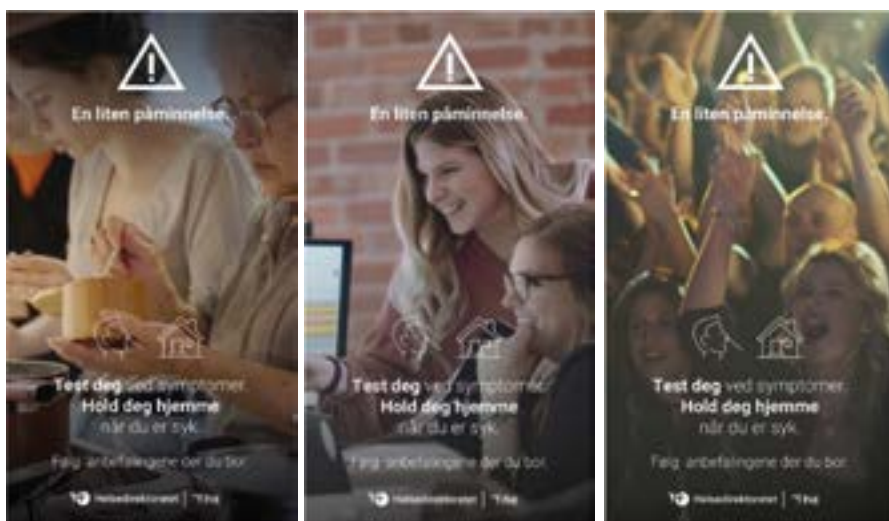
In these videos, the imperative form is less explicitly verbal than in the Danish instructive campaigns. However, a direct verbal message is conveyed when Søren Brostrøm sings, “Go the hell home, go home and lay down in your bed”. In this sentence, we find the same duality of an imperative and good advice, representing the same type of governmental steering (Foucault, 1982, 1991) observed in the instructive posters from the initial phase.

In general, the videos supported the instructive campaigns and contained the same sort of recommendations. Thus, we can also consider the videos as risk communication functioning as a rationality of steering (Dean, 2006). Moreover, we encounter matter out of place (Douglas, 1966) and support

for the early campaigns' focus on new social and hygienic norms, where the audience is encouraged to adopt measures such as keeping distance, staying at home, and avoiding hugging. Even though the campaigns were supportive in all these aspects, they were more indirectly supportive when addressing the new hygienic norms related to our hands. For example, in the video where the young man should stay at home after coughing, the film does not show him coughing into his sleeve. Moreover, none of the videos addressed the necessity of washing hands frequently or using sanitiser. Accordingly, matter out of place, ritual, and taboo were less explicitly addressed in these videos compared with the instructive campaigns.

In Norway, the constitution of the citizenry and the gentle rhetorical force of governmentality present in the initial phase were also evident in later phases. Overall, the Norwegian campaigns displayed ordinary Norwegians, whereas the Danish campaigns used Brostrøm to represent the health authorities. The Norwegian authorities placed themselves in the background and appeared to refrain from giving orders to the public. This was the case in the series “A gentle reminder”, communicated through posters and videos where the health authorities presented ordinary Norwegians in everyday situations. A warning triangle with an exclamation mark was used to signify that these were important messages (see Figure 6.7).

Figure 6.7 Examples from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health's “A gentle reminder” campaign series



Source: Helsedirektoratet, Folkehelseinstituttet, 2022

In the images depicted in Figure 6.7, the title text states, “A gentle reminder”, followed by two sentences that explain what the citizens should bear in mind: “Test yourself if you have symptoms” and “Stay at home when you are sick” followed by the more general advice, “Follow the local recommendations”. These messages are accompanied by different images of people living their everyday lives. Even though the sentences in this campaign were formed grammatically as imperatives (e.g., “test yourself”), the health authorities refrained from using manifestly directive rhetoric that ordered the public from a position of authority, since this was followed by “a gentle reminder”.

In contrast to the Norwegian poster from March 2020 (see Figure 6.2, left), there is no obvious matter out of place in the photographs. However, the warning triangle placed across the images functions as a sign that something is out of place (Douglas, 1966). Thus, in a semiotic relay (Barthes, 1977) of images and text, an extra meaning is created, subtly indicating that even though everything might appear normal, it is not. In other words, something is indeed out of place, so we should all be aware.

A group of Norwegian videos in the series “If you are in quarantine, stay in quarantine” (the sentence all videos ended with, as seen in Figure 6.8) from March 2021 were like the Danish videos presented in a narrative format. One video shows a young woman lying on her bed reading as she receives a text saying, “Miss you, my quarantine girl!”. She answers, “I guess it takes a long time before you know whether you are infected”, and then receives a picture from her boyfriend blowing a kiss at her and sending heart emojis. She smiles, puts the phone away, and picks up the book again (see Figure 6.8, left). The youngsters’ messages mentally merged with requests from the health authorities and became active mediators of the health authorities’ discourses and norms. Moreover, they demonstrated how citizens could become an essential part of the chain in governmental disciplining (Foucault, 2008).

Figure 6.8 Examples from the Norwegian Directorate of Health’s “If you are in quarantine, stay in quarantine” campaign series



Source: Helsedirektoratet, Folkehelseinstituttet, 2022

In late 2020, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency saw a need to sharpen its messages (Olofson, 2020) to make people realise the consequences of their actions. The method selected was a campaign called “Memories” that reminded people of life before Covid-19. Short films made from private mobile phone video recordings from life before Covid-19 were included to entice the public and make them see what life could be like again if they took responsibility and followed the authorities’ advice. The videos were all dated on days during 2019 and contained the text “If we are to return to normal, you and everyone else need to take responsibility” (see Figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9 Examples from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's "Memories" campaign



Source: MSB 2020a, 2020b, 2020c

The actions depicted in the “Memories” videos were deemed risky matter out of place during the pandemic. In this campaign material, the health authorities explicitly assigned responsibility for overcoming the pandemic to Sweden’s citizenry (Luhmann, 2008). The communication used a direct address (“you”), while also implying that this was a common duty and something that everyone must do together. Again, we see a focus on responsibility and togetherness, which was a common theme in the Swedish campaigns.

All the videos from the three countries attempted to establish the kind of risk awareness that we observed in the instructive campaigns. However, this attempt was carried out by focusing on the citizens’ responsibility, not on the danger of the new coronavirus – the videos focus on the audience’s willingness to take a risk.

Thus, in the perseverance phase, the health authorities aimed to curb Covid-19 by encouraging the population to continue with the new habits and by repeating the recommendations, thereby continuing the indirect steering and established risk perspective. However, there are some important differences between the instructive and persevere campaigns. The use of narrative videos was added, although the use of posters was never replaced. However, more significant was the change in rhetorical appeal from instructive communication to the use of narratives and the introduction of humour in Sweden and Denmark.

In the Danish videos, humour was evident through unrealistic features as remedies, which all involved Søren Brostrøm. For example, Brostrøm’s picture and song directly from the jukebox, Brostrøm’s strict face appearing in the mirror, and a street poster where Brostrøm comes alive and blinks his eye to set

up the “strict look”. These are funny because they are unrealistic and because the audience understands that Brostrøm’s strict look is meant as an order, even though it only functions as an appeal, since there is no legal basis for giving orders. Even though the videos appealed to the bad conscience of the audience, they still conveyed a happy tone with the use of humour. In this way, the videos communicated a duty to take responsibility and simultaneously offered an understanding of the difficulties citizens would encounter by complying with the demands of the authorities.

A Swedish campaign from the perseverance phase in 2021 attempted to use a strategy of expressing gratitude towards the Swedish people with a humorous dimension by illustrating the inconveniences caused by following the health authorities’ advice. Large posters in public spaces and short videos encouraged people to continue with their careful behaviour and endure these inconveniences, for example, “Thanks to you who have gone grocery shopping alone” and “Thanks to you who have spent your vacation at home” (see Figure 6.10, left and right, respectively). All the posters had the same text below the photo object: “Keep fighting all the way through. Your effort makes a big difference” (see Figure 6.10).

Figure 6.10 Examples from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency’s “humorous gratitude” campaign



Source: MSB, 2021a

In the videos of this campaign, the message, the people, and the settings were the same as on the posters (MSB, 2021a, 2021b). Displaying these situations, which most people related to and recognised from their own lives during the pandemic, created a sense of community. By using humour and describing peoples’ experiences of life during the pandemic as something slightly uncomfortable, while also being recognisable and almost ordinary, the campaigns made it seem

less dangerous, presenting Covid-19 as a manageable risk rather than a threat (Luhmann, 1997, 2008). Humour can help release negative energy, such as fear and anger (Dahl, 2021), and inspire people to keep following governmental advice. The gravity of the situation was eased by the unserious description of life during Covid-19, while the use of humour also brought forth a feeling of community (Douglas, 1966, 1979).

Surprisingly, performing governance through humour established stronger governmental steering (Foucault, 1982, 1991) than we observed in the instructive campaigns. Even though the communication acknowledged the difficulties that the measures caused, the Danish and Swedish campaigns nonetheless attempted to internalise the recommendations and restrictions in the thoughts and actions of the citizens. This evoked a bad conscience with the Danish videos and a strong sense of personal responsibility with the Swedish ones.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated how governmental steering dominated the campaign rhetoric in Scandinavia and how the aim of the campaigns was to indirectly regulate the populations (Foucault, 2008). In this governmental risk communication, there was a focus on culturally determined aspects of purity and danger, and we demonstrated that the campaigns utilised some well-established rituals in the three countries, such as washing hands and avoiding coughing on each other. The campaigns even expanded on these rituals and created new norms of pure and impure (Douglas, 1966) in the attempt to steer the populations. Another means of action in the campaigns, hence the governmental steering, was the relatively strong appeal to citizens' sense of personal responsibility indicating that citizens should perceive the pandemic more as a personal risk – and hence avoid risk-taking – than an external threat they were exposed to (Luhmann, 2008).

The appeal to solidarity as a governmental strategy was present in all three countries (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Foucault, 2008). The Norwegian campaigns achieved this through the cultural concept of *dugnad* to motivate citizens to take responsibility. In contrast, the Swedish campaigns focused explicitly on duty and how “we can come through this together”. The Danish campaigns were somewhat different, as they only expressed solidarity through the explicit and often repeated sentence “Protect yourself and others with this good advice”. However, this sentence seems to be a clear reflection of the civic mindedness that was often mentioned by the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen. These more explicit appeals to solidarity in both the Swedish and Danish campaigns indicate that the duty to support the common good is to a lesser degree part of the Swedish and Danish cultures than it is part of the Norwegian culture. In

Sweden and Denmark, this has created a demand for more explicit and imperative communication about solidarity. In comparison, the campaigns in Norway could rely on the established and well-known concept of *dugnad*. Even though governmental steering is by definition indirect (Foucault, 1982, 2008), this also shows that it was more indirect in Norway than in Sweden and Denmark.

Our analysis demonstrates how the campaigns expressed the crisis management strategies in each country. In Sweden, we observed how the informational strategy represented in the campaigns primarily focused on facts and instructions on how to act, although part of the campaigns also used emotional appeals and humour to motivate citizens to continue their good habits. In the Danish political strategy, the campaigns were instructive, expressing how people should act responsibly to avoid infection. Subsequently, during the perseverance phase, humour was employed to motivate citizens to continue with the new hygiene habits and social norms (Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1982). The authorities were highly visible in the instructive and motivating campaigns. For example, Søren Brostrøm appeared in a humorous way as the strict authority in the videos. Although the Norwegian strategy was political, it was less authoritative than the Danish strategy. Accordingly, it left more space for the informational parts in a less instructive tone. This gentler and downplayed tone was supported by the strong focus on citizen-to-citizen communication performed in the campaigns instead of a visible or loudly authoritative voice. This demonstrated how the Norwegian campaigns depended on informality more than formal institutions (Bentkowska, 2021).

The overall similarities and subtle differences in governance strategy and risk perception in the three countries indicated that although the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Scandinavian countries were largely similar, there were fine-grained differences in the authorities' rhetorical attuning to context and cultural peculiarities. Thus, any successful response to a health crisis will necessarily differ from country to country, from context to context, and from pandemic to pandemic. This was probably the ambition when handling the Covid-19 pandemic in the Scandinavian countries. However, we can wonder if the fine-tuning could have played out differently and, for example, consider whether the more inviting and gentle tone in the Norwegian campaigns could have also proven useful in Denmark and Sweden.

References

- Almlund, P., Andersen, N. B., Halkier, B., & Schröder, K. C. (2020). Public communication campaigns as mundane category. *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research*, 36(68), 66–87. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v36i68.118071>
- Andersen, N. Å. (1999). *Diskursive analysestrategier: Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* [Discursive strategies for analysis: Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann]. Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne.
- Andersen, N. B., & Almlund, P. (2013). Fra usikkerhed om sygdom til usikkerhed om bivirkninger: En aktør-netværksteoretisk analyse af usikkerheder om influenza A(H1N1) [From uncertainty about disease to uncertainty about side effects: An actor-network theoretical analysis of uncertainties about influenza A(H1N1)]. *Dansk Sociologi*, 24(2), 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.22439/dansoc.v24i2.4588>
- Arnoldi, J. (2009). *Risk*. Polity Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/41275190>
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans., Ed.). Hill and Wang.
- Beck, U. (1997). *Risikosamfundet: På vej mod en ny modernitet* [Risk society: Towards a new modernity]. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Bentkowska, K. (2021). Response to governmental Covid-19 restrictions: The role of informal institutions. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 17, 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174413742100028X>
- Bjørkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Villadsen, L., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidaritatem: Rhetorical leadership Strategies in Scandinavia During Covid-19. In M. Lewis, E. Goven-der, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating Covid-19* (pp. 163–184). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Boswell, J., Corbett, J., Rhodes, R. A. W., & Salomonsen, H. H. (2021). The comparative ‘court politics’ of Covid-19: Explaining government responses to the pandemic. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1258–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942159>
- Dahl, J. M. R. (2021). *Voices on the border: Comedy and immigration in the Scandinavian public spheres*. University of Bergen.
- Dean, M. (2006). *Governmentality: Magt & styring i det moderne samfund* [Governmentality: Power and control in modern society]. Forlaget Sociologi.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203361832>
- Douglas, M. (1979). Taboo. In R. Cavendish (Ed.), *Man, myth and magic: An illustrated encyclopedia of the supernatural* (Vol. 20) (pp. 2767–2771). Marshall Cavendish Corporation.
- Douglas, M. (1992). *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203430866>
- Esaïasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from ‘the Swedish experiment’. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- European Social Survey. (2018). 9 Data. Data file edition 2.0. NSD – Norwegian for Research Data, Norway [Data archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS]. <https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018>
- Parliament of Denmark. (2021). *Håndteringen af covid-19 i foråret 2020* [The handling of Covid-19 during the spring 2020]. <https://www.ft.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/publikationer/haandtering-af-covid19-foraar-2020.ashx>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden]. (2020a, January 22). *Folkhälsomyndigheten följer händelseutvecklingen kring det nya coronaviruset. Vi uppdaterar kontinuerligt vår webb med bekräftad information kring utbrottet. Här kan du* [The Public Health Agency follows the development of events surrounding the new coronavirus. We continuously update our website with confirmed information about the outbreak. Here you can] [link included] [poster]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/Folkhalsomyndigheten/photos/a.850014671832965/1433111740189919/>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden]. (2020b, March 27). *Vad menar vi egen-*

- tligen när vi pratar om att plana ut kurvan? Se filmen och läs mer om hur du [What do we really mean when we talk about flattening the curve? Watch the film and read more about how you] [link included] [video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/Folkhalsomyndigheten/videos/912204105909723>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden]. (2020c, April 9). *Håll avstånd! Vill du ut i solen? Håll avstånd till andra. Hjälp till att minska smittspridningen. Läs mer om hur* [Keep distance! Do you want to go out in the sun? Keep your distance from others. Help reduce the spread of infection. Read more about how] [Link included] [Poster]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/Folkhalsomyndigheten/posts/1500742546760171>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden]. (2021). *Informationsmaterial om covid-19 på svenska och andra språk* [Information material about Covid-19 in Swedish and other languages]. Retrieved September, 2021, from <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/informationsmaterial/>
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In C. G. Burchell, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0829320100002507>
- Foucault, M. (2008). *Sikkerhed, territorium, befolkning: Forelæsninger på Collège de France 1977–1978* [Security, territory, population: Lectures at Collège de France 1977–1978]. Hans Reitzels Forlag. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993100530010105>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2020). Public sector communication: Risk and crisis communication. In V. Luoma-aho, & M. J. Canel (Eds.). *The handbook of public sector communication* (pp. 229–244). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119263203.ch15>
- Grondel, S. H. (2021). Covid-19, the ubiquitous national security threat: Lessons learned around the globe. *International Journal of Legal Information*, 49(2), 66–79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jli.2021.15>
- Helsedirektoratet, Folkehelseinstituttet [Norwegian Directorate of Health, Norwegian Institute of Public Health]. (2022). *Materiell fra Helsedirektoratet* [Material from the Directorate of Health]. Retrieved March, 2022, from <https://helsedirektoratet.imageshop.no/294179>
- Helsingen, L. M., Refsum, E., Gjøstein, D. K., Løberg, M., Bretthauer, M., Kalager, M., & Emilsson, L. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic in Norway and Sweden – threats, trust, and impact on daily life: A comparative survey. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1597–1597. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09615-3>
- Henrich, N., & Holmes, B. (2011). Communicating during a pandemic: Information the public wants about the disease and new vaccines and drugs. *Health Promotion Practice*, 12(4), 610–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839910363536>
- Jørgensen, F., Bor, A., & Petersen, M. B. (2021). Compliance without fear: Individual-level protective behaviour during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 26, 679–696. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12519>
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Expert uncertainty: Arguments bolstering the ethos of expertise in situations of uncertainty. In S. Oswald, M. Lewinski, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The pandemic of argumentation* (pp. 85–103). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_5
- Luhmann, N. (1997). *Iagttagelse og paradoks: Essays om autopoietiske systemer* [Observation and paradox: Essays about autopoietic systems]. Gyldendal.
- Luhmann, N. (2008). *Risk: A sociological theory*. Aldine Transaction. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315128665>
- Lupton, D. (1999). *Risk*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203070161>
- MSB [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency]. (2020a, November 27). *Minnen från Studenten* [Memories from student celebrations] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mix1rpaU0oc&ab_channel=MSB

- MSB [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency]. (2020b, November 27). *Minnen från Lucia* [*Memories from St. Lucy's day*] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yOMT8C25ZY&ab_channel=MSB
- MSB [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency]. (2020c, November 27). *Minnen från semester* [*Memories from vacation*]. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R37LGdluVI&ab_channel=MSB
- MSB [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency]. (2021a). *msb.se*. Retrieved November, 2021, from <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/aktuellt/pagaende-handelser-och-insats/coronaviruset---covid-19/annonsmaterial-med-nationella-budskap/pagaende-kampanj/affischer/tack-till-dig-som-har-semesterat-hemma-251x372-pdf.pdf>
- MSB [Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency]. (2021b, June 10). *Tack till dig* [*Thank you*] [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksD-K9HwuKo&ab_channel=MSB
- Olofson, M. T. P. (2020). *Slutredovisning av regeringsuppdrag* [*Final report on government assignments*]. The Corona Commission.
- Sar, S., & Anghelcev, G. (2012). Perceived risk mediates the impact of mood on the effectiveness of health PSAs: Implications for public health marketing. *Journal of Social Marketing*, 3(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/20426761311297243>
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [Danish Health Authority]. (2020a). *De blå coronaråd* [*The blue corona recommendations*]. Retrieved October, 2021, from <https://www.sst.dk/da/Om-os/Kommunikation/Kampagner/COVID-19/De-blaa-coronaraad>
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [Danish Health Authority]. (2020b). *Sundhedsstyrelsens borgerrettede kommunikationsindsats om ny coronavirus/Covid-19* [*The Danish Health Authority's communication to citizens about the coronavirus/Covid-19*]. https://www.sst.dk/da/Udgivelser/2020/Sundhedsstyrelsens-borgerrettede-kommunikationsindsats-om-ny-coronavirus_COVID-19
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [Danish Health Authority]. (2020c). *Vi kan godt* [*We can*]. Retrieved October, 2021, from <https://www.sst.dk/da/Om-os/Kommunikation/Kampagner/COVID-19/Vi-kan-godt>
- Triukosenya, S., Nitinawarat, S., Satian, P., Somboonsavatdee, A., Chotikarn, P., Thammasanya, T., Wanlapakorn, N., Sudhinaraset, N., Boonyamalik, P., Kakhong, B., & Poovorawan, Y. (2021). Effects of public health interventions on the epidemiological spread during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in Thailand. *PloS ONE*, 16(2), e0246274. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246274>
- Warren, G. W., Lofstedt, R., & Wardman, J. K. (2021). Covid-19: The winter lockdown strategy in five European nations. *Journal of Risk Research*, 24(3-4), 267–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1891802>

Communicating Covid-19 on social media

Analysing the use of Twitter and Instagram by Nordic health authorities and prime ministers

Jenny Lindholm,^I Tom Carlson,^I Frederike Albrecht,^{II}
& Helena Hermansson^{III}

^I Political Science with Media and Communication, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

^{II} Department of Political Science and Law, Swedish Defence University, and Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS), Uppsala University, Sweden

^{III} Department of Leadership and Command & Control, Swedish Defence University, and Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS), Uppsala University, Sweden

Abstract

This chapter analyses how Nordic health authorities and prime ministers used social media during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research questions address the extent to which they interacted with other actors on social media and what communication objectives they pursued in messages to the public. The data consists of health authorities' Twitter communication and prime ministers' Instagram posts. The results show that both the health authorities and prime ministers primarily interacted internally with domestic governmental and administrative actors. Still, they pursued different communication objectives. Whereas the health authorities mainly instructed the public on how to act, the prime ministers provided support and appealed for solidarity. National differences are observed. The Danish case stands out, as both the national health authority and the prime minister clearly focused on communicating support to the public.

Keywords: crisis communication, social media, health authorities, political leaders, communicating Covid-19

Lindholm, J., Carlson, T., Albrecht, F., & Hermansson, H. (2023). Communicating Covid-19 on social media: Analysing the use of Twitter and Instagram by Nordic health authorities and prime ministers. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 149–172). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-7>

Introduction

During crises, social media has proved to be prone to becoming channels where misinformation is distributed (Cinelli et al., 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020). Simultaneously, though, social media can be essential for people in times of crisis for finding critical up-to-date information, seeking support, and sharing information and experiences (Austin et al., 2012; Brummette & Sisco, 2015). Consequently, for today's public authorities and political leaders, crisis management is not only about actions, but also about communication strategies and about the information shared in a new complex communications context where social media is central (Boin et al., 2016). For such authorities and leaders, it is essential during crises to share consistent and coordinated information and messages on social media to both meet the public's needs and counteract potential trends of misinformation. Moreover, using social media as a communication channel during a crisis gives actors a more direct and immediate relationship with certain groups in society, such as young people and those less interested in following traditional news (Ceccobelli & Vaccari, 2021).

Although social media as a form of crisis management and crisis communication is nowadays utilised during all types of crises, Graham and colleagues (2015) have demonstrated that social media is used significantly more during public health crises. One explanation is that the need for information is more widespread if a health crisis poses an imminent threat to the well-being of the general public, in comparison with disasters or social or political crises (Graham et al., 2015). In an international study of political communication during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lilleker et al., 2021b), one conclusion is that social media played a significant and positive role during the pandemic (Lilleker et al., 2021a).

In this chapter, we provide a review of research on the use of social media by health authorities and political leaders, and we present an empirical analysis of how Nordic health authorities and prime ministers used Twitter and Instagram, respectively, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The main reason to study these state actors is that during major health crises, people not only go online to follow news media; they also turn directly to social media communication by authorities and leaders to understand and make sense of the situation, receive guidance and support, and assess the measures taken. Social media can be utilised by both types of actors to communicate controlled messages about the Covid-19 crisis directly to the public. As health crisis communication by health authorities and political leaders are typically studied separately, one contribution of this chapter is to identify similarities and differences in the Covid-19 communication approaches on social media between health authorities and political leaders across the Nordics, paying attention to the political and administrative context. Specifically, our analysis focuses on two crucial aspects of crisis communication on social media, that is, the interaction of

the communicating actor with other actors in the messages and, secondly, the specific objectives of the communicators when communicating to the public. Two research questions are addressed:

- RQ1. To what extent did Nordic public health authorities and political leaders interact with other actors on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ2. What communication objectives did Nordic public health authorities and political leaders pursue in messages to the public on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The foci of the research questions – interaction and objectives – are further discussed in the analytical framework. The analysed period is the critical first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, starting on 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared a pandemic, and ending three months later. We compare two empirical case studies: the Twitter communication by the health authorities in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), and the Instagram posts by the prime ministers in three Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden). The selection of countries and social media platforms are discussed in the data and method section.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. An initial literature review is followed by the analytical framework for the case studies. Thereafter, the data and methods are described. Subsequently, the findings of the analysis of the two cases – the Nordic health authorities and prime ministers, respectively – are reported. The final part juxtaposes the central findings from the two case studies and presents a concluding discussion.

Literature review

During crises, public organisations play a pivotal role in communicating to the general public. As many actors compete for relevance, attention, and legitimacy during crises (Hall & Wolf, 2021; Holmes et al., 2009), it is essential for public organisations, such as governmental actors and authorities, to deliver reliable, consistent, and effective communication to citizens and to coordinate and collaborate with other public organisations regarding outgoing messages (Boin et al., 2016; Comfort, 2007; Kapucu, 2006).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, previous research has found that government agencies in the US may have initially struggled with adequate risk communication on Twitter, but over time, they increased in communication consistency and coordination (Wang et al., 2021). A comparative study of public health agency communication on Twitter and in agency press releases

in Italy, the US, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated that health authorities in these three countries predominantly coordinated their communication with other domestic government agencies (Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). Moreover, the study showed that the communication rarely indicated interaction with political officials and domestic nongovernmental organisations.

Coombs (2020) has identified communicative demands for the Covid-19 pandemic. Demands to deal with anxiety, create empathy, and prevent fatigue among the public can be seen to have a clear connection to supportive messages by public organisations managing the crisis, while emphasising efficacy to effectively manage the crisis through campaigns, such as #Flattenthecurve, has a clear instructive function. The importance of supportive messages is further illustrated by an empirical study, which identified that American government actors' tweets with reassuring messages during the Covid-19 crisis were much more likely to be retweeted by the public than tweets with alarming tones (Rao et al., 2020).

Previous research on organisational crisis communication has often focused on reputational aspects (Olsson, 2014), with less attention on aspects involving other objectives of organisational communication. Furthermore, the increasingly complex nature and structure of social media channels and the inherent competition for legitimacy between senders during crises have created a need to understand how public organisations attempt to proactively engage in this context by coordinating their messages with other actors.

Communication by political leaders, in turn, becomes specifically important during national crises, when fear and anxiety direct citizens' attention to the situation, and they look for motivational cues from their leaders. During crises, leaders should display both competence and empathy to guide the public through an unexpected event (Wooten & James, 2008). Hence, successful communication with the audience is about clear and concise communication through institutional messages as well as emotional supportive connection (Gigliotti, 2016). In the words of Boin and colleagues (2016: 87), an effective crisis communication frame by leaders "offers a credible explanation of what happened, it offers guidance, it instills hope, shows empathy, and suggests that leaders are in control".

Concerning research on political leaders' use of social media specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic, no Nordic studies were found (as of October 2022). International research has mostly analysed leaders' use of Twitter in crisis communication and looked at the initial phase of the pandemic. A study of 143 worldwide state leaders' use of Twitter during the early stages of the pandemic found that several of the leaders who tweeted actively about Covid-19 obtained an increase in followers (Haman, 2020; see also Rullo, 2021). This finding would suggest that people turn to leaders, also on social media, in times of crises. A content analysis of viral Covid-19-related tweets in March 2020

from the G7 world leaders (Rufai & Bunce, 2020) found that 82 per cent of the tweets were informative, while 9 per cent were “morale-boosting”. Almost a third of the informing tweets included links to official governmental sources.

Other studies have paid attention to affective and symbolic aspects. Drylie-Carey and colleagues (2020) – investigating European political leaders’ Covid-19-related communication on Twitter by looking at the visual information in the tweets – found that most of the leaders did not personalise the information or try to engage their followers, such as leading by example and communicating authentic leadership, which can facilitate implementation of recommendations and sanctions during crises. Moreover, one study of political leaders’ tweets found that female leaders were more likely than male leaders to use empathetic language and highlight the need for collective actions and solidarity (Dehingia et al., 2021).

Previous research on how political leaders use social media in the Covid-19 crisis has rarely addressed how leaders coordinate and interact with other actors in social media. In addition, systematic investigations of how leaders in their pandemic crisis communication on social media manoeuvre between different communication objectives do not abound.

Analytical framework

In this chapter, we apply an analytical framework that combines two critical functions of crisis communication on social media. First, actors’ positioning in a communication ecology and the interaction with other actors in said ecology, and second, the pursuit of specific objectives when communicating with the public.

Crises challenge public organisations and political leaders with the need to disseminate information in ways that reduce potential information inconsistencies. Therefore, it is critical that these actors deliver their messages “in a coordinated and collaborative way [to] avoid the creation of an information vacuum that may otherwise be filled by misinformation” (Tagliacozzo et al., 2021: 935). An important way to decrease information inconsistencies and to amplify the actor’s own message is the interaction and coordination with other actors to disseminate messages. Studying the coordination and interaction with other actors in communicative networks originates from the idea of communication ecologies, which is a conceptualisation used to describe communication networks that actors interact with when pursuing a specific goal in communicative efforts (Houston, 2021).

This study adopts a framework by Tagliacozzo and colleagues (2021) to examine the presence of such interaction to coordinate communication or to illustrate collaborative efforts specifically in the context of a global health crisis.

According to this framework, actors position themselves in their communication ecology by engaging with other actors. By doing so, the actor's message can be amplified and has a greater chance of outweighing other strains of information, like misinformation (Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). When engaging with other actors on social media specifically, interaction can be as simple as mentioning other actors or sharing their content. It can also occur through collaboratively shared information or by disseminating messages that illustrate ongoing collaborative efforts with other actors to the public. Tagliacozzo and colleagues (2021) suggest that governmental organisations, political officials such as ministers, national or international scientific organisations, and nongovernmental organisations are of core interest for actors to include in their communication ecologies, and hence, to interact with on social media during public health crises.

Since communication ecologies imply the pursuit of a common goal by actors within the network, our study also incorporates an analysis of communication objectives to distinguish between different types of objectives that actors can have when disseminating information on social media during a crisis. This framework is adopted from Sturges (1994) and distinguishes between three core types of communication objectives. According to Sturges (1994), when a crisis occurs, the first important task is to instruct the public on how to physically act or behave to protect themselves or others. The second core objective of communication is to provide people with support to cope with the crisis psychologically and to adapt to the extraordinary situation (Ozanne et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2015). Strengthening or rebuilding the organisation's reputation is the third potential communication objective, which is most important when the organisation's responsibility for the occurred crisis is high (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

In the context of health crises more broadly, and Covid-19 specifically, instructive messages advise people how to act and behave. Supportive messages can either convey emotional support or promote general well-being. Finally, reputational messages aim at boosting the sender's reputation.

Data and methods

Data

The empirical part comprises two case studies: an analysis of Twitter communication by health authorities in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden; and an analysis of the Instagram posts by the prime ministers in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. The Instagram posts by the Norwegian prime minister Erna Solberg were not analysed, as she published too few posts ($n = 12$) on her personal Instagram account during the examined period. By focusing on the social media platform Twitter, the first case study builds upon earlier international studies

of how health authorities tweeted during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). As the official Twitter accounts of the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian prime ministers appear to represent the formal institution and not the person, the second case study examined the Covid-19-related posts on the prime ministers' personal Instagram accounts.

Inevitably, there are some differences between Twitter and Instagram. Twitter has a 280-character limit for tweets, which creates short and clear text messages or captions, whereas images and videos are in focus on Instagram. Instagram has been shown to deepen the relationship between actors and the public in crises (Guidry et al., 2017). Therefore, Instagram provides a valid platform to study the empathic leadership required from political leaders, while Twitter has proved to play a key role in delivering information between government agencies and the public (Rosenberg et al., 2020).

The two case studies do not cover all five Nordic countries. Due to practical problems in finding coders with sufficient skills in the Icelandic language, the communication by the Icelandic health authority and prime minister is not included in the empirical analyses.

The data of the first case study consists of Twitter data during 11 March–10 June 2020. In total, 698 tweets were analysed from the official accounts of four Nordic public health authorities:

- Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen], Denmark. @SSTSunhed (Sundhedsstyrelsen, n.d.), $n = 115$.
- Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos], Finland. @THLorg (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos, n.d.), $n = 416$.
- Norwegian Institute of Public Health [Folkhelseinstituttet], Norway. @Folkhelseinst (Folkhelseinstituttet, n.d.), $n = 73$.
- Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten], Sweden. @Folkhalsomynd (Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d.), $n = 94$.

The second case study consisted of posts published on the following prime ministers' personal Instagram accounts during 11 March–10 June 2020:

- Mette Fredriksen, Denmark, leader of the Social Democrats, female. @mette (Fredriksen, n.d.).
- Sanna Marin, Finland, leader of the Social Democrats, female. @sannamarin (Marin, n.d.).
- Stefan Löfven, Sweden, leader of the Social Democrats, male. @stefanlofven (Löfven, n.d.).

In all, 183 Covid-19–related posts were registered. All the posts that had a clear connection to Covid-19 – both directly, such as mentioning the coronavirus or using the hashtag #COVID19 in the caption, and indirectly, such as referring to the ongoing crisis. The posts are distributed as follows: Fredriksen posted 69 (82% of all her posts during this period); Löfven posted 93 (95%); and Marin posted 21 (88%). These posts included 203 images and videos (some posts contained multiple photos, graphics, or videos).

All tweets and Instagram posts quoted in this chapter were originally written in Nordic languages and have been translated by us to English.

Methods

In both case studies, we applied quantitative content analysis to the data with the single tweet or Instagram post as the unit of analysis. The analysis of Instagram posts examined the written text captures and, when available, the verbal content in videos.

To answer the first research question, the tweets and posts were coded for the presence of interaction with four types of actors: government organisations; political officials; nongovernmental organisations; and scientific organisations (see Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). Interaction consisted of mentioned actors, reused information (reposts or quotes), or collaboration (jointly produced and released information or information about collaboration with the actor in question). The study of the prime ministers' Instagram posts allowed a further distinction between two types of governmental actors: the prime minister's government and its ministers, and other governmental actors. Moreover, interaction with public health agencies or organisations were coded in the Instagram analysis.

Regarding the second research question, the tweets and posts were coded for the absence or presence of three objectives (examples of coding are provided in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter):

- Instructive messages advising people on how to act and physically behave to protect themselves or others before and during a crisis, for example, messages instructing people to maintain social distance from others.
- Supportive messages, which can be of two types: 1) messages – including encouraging messages – intended to emotionally support people to face adversity and to strengthen their psychological coping capacity (e.g., messages concerning how to cope with social distancing); and 2) messages aiming to promote general well-being from a broader perspective (e.g., messages urging individuals to not avoid seeking medical care due to fear of the novel coronavirus).
- Reputational messages that aim to strengthen the sender's reputation. This could be done by tweeting about the achievements of the organisa-

tion or actor. For example, the health authorities can inform about new collaborations or studies. Political leaders, in turn, may frame actions undertaken by themselves or their government in a positive light.

In addition, given that prime ministers act as central political leaders of the people during a crisis, the Instagram analysis further examined the absence or presence of three affective means to reach the supportive objective in the posts. These means were developed from an inductive reading of the posts but are also grounded in the literature of political leadership in crises, stressing the need of leaders to express involvement and empathy and instil hope (Boin et al., 2016): 1) morale-boosting messages that encourage the public to endure during the crisis (see Rufai & Bunce, 2020); 2) messages expressing empathy by showing concern towards people or groups affected by the pandemic and sharing their feelings; and 3) messages expressing gratitude or recognition to groups, individuals, actors, or organisations (examples of coding are included in the online Supplementary Material file).

As initial readings of the prime ministers' posts revealed that they included appeals for national solidarity and unity – which has been noted to be a recurrent feature in political leaders' general crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021a) – the posts were coded for the absence or presence of appeals for solidarity, such as asking persons or groups to make an effort and take responsibility for the whole (the community, the nation, and its people; see the online Supplementary Material file for an example).

A codebook was used to guide coders through every step of the coding process. An inter-reliability check was performed on 20 randomly sampled Instagram posts, and the inter-coder reliability was assessed using Holsti's formula and yielded an average coefficient value across all variables of 0.91 (range 0.85–1.00). The average reliability coefficients across pairs of coders, using Holsti's test on a random sample of 20 Swedish tweets, exceeded 0.90 for all variables. In both case study analyses, coders discussed unclear cases and differences in coding decisions in order to reach agreement on final appropriate coding.

Findings

Nordic health authorities' Covid-19 communication on Twitter

Regarding interaction with other organisations and actors, the results in Table 7.1 indicate that most Nordic health authorities commonly interacted with other government organisations, for example, by mentioning them in tweets, retweeting their information, or collaborating with them. In Denmark and

Finland, approximately one-fifth of all tweets by the national health authority were characterised by interaction with other government organisations, and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health interacted with other government organisations in 14 per cent of their tweets, indicating that Nordic public health authorities were overall likely to engage in interaction with agencies similar to their own organisation. Only the Public Health Agency of Sweden made substantially fewer (7%) references to government organisations in their tweets.

In contrast, most Nordic countries’ health authorities rarely interacted with elected political officials on Twitter. The authorities mentioned political officials or reused their information at most in 5 per cent of all tweets.

Table 7.1 *Interaction with other actors in tweets by Nordic health authorities, 11 March–10 June (per cent)*

Actors	Danish Health Authority (n = 115)	Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (n = 416)	Norwegian Institute of Public Health (n = 73)	Public Health Agency of Sweden (n = 94)
Government organisation	19	20	14	7
Political official	5	2	3	5
Nongovernmental organisation	21	3	1	4
Scientific organisation	1	3	4	1

Twitter interaction with nongovernmental organisations on both domestic and international levels was remarkably high (21%) for the Danish Health Authority, while remaining below the 5 per cent mark for the remaining Nordic countries. The Danish Health Authority interacted with, for example, various doctors’ and nurses’ associations and the Danish Red Cross.

Direct interaction with scientific organisations and experts on Twitter was low in all four countries. In Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, interaction with these actors rarely occurred on Twitter (interaction rates varied 1–3%). Although the Norwegian Institute of Public Health had similarly low interaction rates with these actors (4%), the results should be treated with caution, as it did not directly interact with scientific organisations or experts by mentioning them specifically but rather showed great focus on research and scientific knowledge outside the institutional boundaries, which were communicated through a frequently updated systematic map of Covid-19 research. These research summaries were aimed at making it easier to access and review relevant scientific knowledge (Folkhelseinstituttet, 2020a). While the newsletters connected to the mapping of Covid-19 research referred to relevant scientific experts, the coded material in the form of tweets did not make any direct references to these experts.

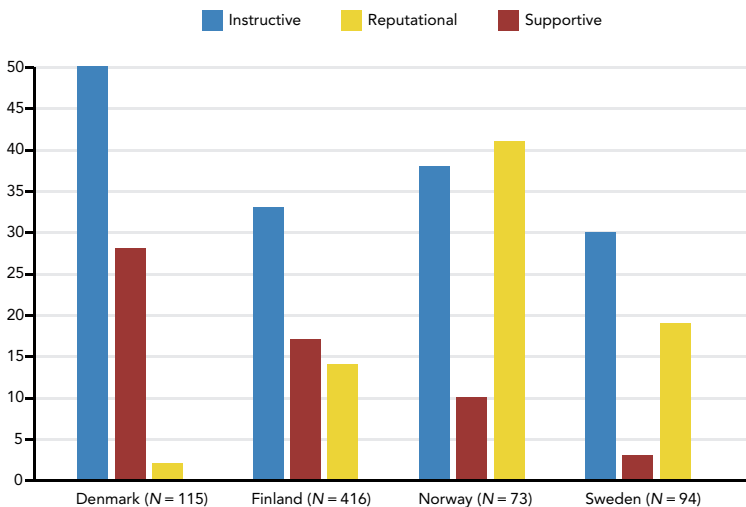
Regarding communication objectives, then, tweets by all the Nordic public health authorities in this study focused on instructive messages, for example, tweets containing instructions on how the public should prepare or behave physically (see Figure 7.1). In Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 30–40 per cent of all tweets during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic were instructive. Denmark illustrated the highest proportion of instructive tweets: half of the Danish Health Authority’s tweets between March and June 2020 provided the public with instructions and guidelines on how to prepare, act, or behave.

It is worth noting that instructions given by the health authorities varied in the tone in which they were phrased (for an examination of the differences of tone in Covid-19 public campaigns in Scandinavia, see Almlund et al., Chapter 6). Some statements were vague recommendations – for example, “Think about whether the journey is really necessary” (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020a) – to be interpreted and acted upon by each individual recipient. Other statements used more assertive styles:

Protect yourself and others. Try not to meet other people if you feel unwell and you have a runny nose, cough, or fever. Do not go to work, school, or day care. This applies even if you just feel a bit unwell. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020b)

While we did not investigate communication styles further in our study, it is possible that although the proportions of instructive messages were high across all four authorities, the way these instructions were delivered varied between the Nordic countries.

Figure 7.1 Communication objectives present in tweets by Nordic health authorities, 11 March–10 June (per cent)



The Nordic health authorities included in our study had different approaches to supportive messages, for instance, tweets intended to support the public in adjusting to the Covid-19 crisis and in maintaining general well-being. Almost one-third of all tweets by the Danish Health Authority contained assistance to people on how to adjust to the crisis (see Figure 7.1). In comparison, a share of 10–17 per cent of all analysed tweets by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare aimed at maintaining individuals' general well-being. Finally, this type of support barely existed in tweets by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (3%).

In Norway, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health promoted #KlappForNorge [#ClapForNorway], which was intended to express support and gratitude for essential workers (Folkhelseinstituttet, 2020b). The Danish Health Authority provided the Danish public with detailed advice on how to maintain their mental health during the pandemic: “It is important to keep mental health in mind during the #coronavirus-epidemic. We have developed 11 good tips about what one can do to avoid the epidemic taking a too large toll on one’s general well-being #COVID19dk” (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020a). In other cases, supportive messages thematised how everyday life was affected by the pandemic, including tweets targeting potentially vulnerable groups, such as families with children (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2020b). Comparable supportive tones or encouraging voices from the Public Health Agency of Sweden were essentially non-existent on Twitter. One of the few tweets including supportive content warned the elderly of new forms of fraud in the context of the pandemic (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020c).

Reputational messages – for example, tweets aimed at (re)building the health authorities' reputation among the public – were most common in Norway, where two out of five tweets presented the authority in a positive light. The proportion of tweets strengthening agency reputation was lower in Finland (14%) and Sweden (19%), and rare in Denmark (2%). The comparatively high frequency of tweets in the reputation category in Norway (41%) emanates from two activities that the Norwegian Institute of Public Health undertook frequently on Twitter. First, they made an ambitious effort to regularly collate and organise research reports, publications, and other information concerning Covid-19 in, which they called a “LiveMap on COVID-19 evidence”. Multiple tweets informed followers when new reports were added and were simultaneously used for self-promotion: “The map of COVID-19 research <https://t.co/ejH4U1knqc> @folkehelsinst makes it easier to produce systematic reviews. What are the burning questions? See Newsletter #4” (Folkhelseinstituttet, 2020a). Second, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health developed an app early during the pandemic, “Smittestopp” [Contagion stop], aimed at assisting in tracing and breaking chains of transmission. Issues related to the development and testing of the app were frequently posted on Twitter (see, e.g., Folkhelseinstituttet, 2020c).

Reputation-reinforcing tweets in the Swedish case presented, for example, survey results that indicated high levels of public trust in the agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020d), or self-promotion by presenting the authority's work in a positive light: "The Public Health Agency takes the initiative to collaborate to increase COVID-19 testing capacity" (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020e). The Danish Health Authority, on the other hand, mostly avoided reputational tweets (2%).

Nordic prime ministers' Covid-19 communication on Instagram

With regard to how the Nordic prime ministers included in this study interacted with other organisations and actors in their Instagram communication, few posts were re-posts (4 of 183), even less (2) re-used information from or quoted other actors, and only 1 post was coded as explicitly communicating a collaborative effort (prime ministers routinely interact with different societal actors, e.g., discussions and hearings; thus, such day-to-day cooperation was not coded here as collaborative efforts). Interaction by simply mentioning other actors was the rule. In general, as Table 7.2 shows, the prime ministers primarily interacted with the core actors in pandemic crisis management: the government and ministers, other governmental organisations, and various health agencies. The prime ministers referred to other types of actors (political officials, nongovernmental organisations, and scientific organisations) to a lesser extent. The interaction with scientific organisations and experts was close to non-existent in the posts.

Table 7.2 *Interaction with actors in Instagram posts by Nordic prime ministers, 11 March–10 June (per cent)*

Actors	Mette Fredriksen (DK) (n = 69)	Stefan Löfven (SE) (n = 93)	Sanna Marin (FI) (n = 21)	Total (n = 183)
Government and ministers	15	62	62	44
External governmental organisation	23	44	10	32
Political official	12	8	5	9
Nongovernmental organisation	9	24	0	15
Scientific organisation	1	2	0	2
Health agency	19	54	24	37

A cross-national comparison of the results reported in Table 7.2 reveals some differences in the approaches of the prime ministers. The Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, stands out as the one who was most focused on interacting with

core crisis managers, that is, his own government (62%), other governmental bodies (44%), and health agencies (54%). Additionally, he mentioned various nongovernmental organisations to a higher extent (24%) than the others did. For example, he brought up the valuable work of Swedish churches, religious communities, and civic organisations (e.g., organisations of the Swedish sports movement and pensioners' associations). The Finnish prime minister, Sanna Marin, is conspicuous in her strong emphasis on interacting with her government (62%), while mentioning other organisations and actors sparingly (ranging 0–24%). That stands out in contrast to the Danish prime minister, Mette Fredriksen, who mentioned her government and ministers in only 15 per cent of her posts and had a more varied mix of interactions.

Regarding communication objectives, Table 7.3 illustrates similarities as well as differences between the prime ministers. One similarity is that the presence of the three main objectives (instructive, supportive, and reputational) in the posts are ranked in the same order in all countries, although the levels differ: 1) supportive, 2) instructive, 3) reputational. In general, reputational objectives were not stressed (22% of total posts). Possibly, in this early and initially acute phase of the pandemic crisis, it was neither the time nor appropriate for leaders to exalt their capability to handle the crisis and place their taken measures in a positive light. Notably, though, Löfven was twice as likely as his Nordic colleagues to include reputation-building messages.

Another similarity across the prime ministers' communication practices is that a majority of their posts contained appeals for solidarity directed to the public (ranging 51–73%). In particular, Löfven called for solidarity (73%). For example: “we now also see [...] people coming together. Solidarity is there when it is needed most. We all need to do our part for the good of society and Sweden” (Löfven, 2020a). Fredriksen revived the Danish term *samfundssind*, which can be roughly translated as community spirit or civic-mindedness and has been defined by the Danish Language Council as “putting the concern of society higher than one's own interests” (Johanson, 2020; see also Bjørkdahl et al., 2021): “It depends on all of us. Every single person's behaviour matters. We must show *samfundssind*” (Fredriksen, 2020b). In Finland, Marin stated that “it is the responsibility of each of us to protect our own health, that of our loved ones, and that of our fellow human beings” (Marin, 2020).

Table 7.3 *Communication objectives present in Instagram posts by Nordic prime ministers, 11 March–10 June (per cent)*

Objectives	Mette Fredriksen (DK) (n = 69)	Stefan Löfven (SE) (n = 93)	Sanna Marin (FI) (n = 21)	Total (n = 183)
Instructive	25	45	19	34
Supportive	80	74	33	72
Reputational	15	30	14	22
Morale boosting	36	47	19	40
Expressing empathy	44	30	10	33
Expressing gratitude	55	18	19	32
Appealing for solidarity	51	73	52	62

Regarding differences, Löfven stressed instructive messages to the citizens about how to behave during the pandemic to a higher extent than his Danish and Finnish colleagues did (“keep a distance” was the most common exhortation). Another difference across the prime ministers is that Fredriksen and Löfven very frequently communicated supportive objectives in their posts (80% and 74%, respectively) in contrast to Marin (33%). However, an examination of the presence of the three affective ways to express support reveals somewhat different approaches between the Swedish and Danish prime ministers. Löfven most frequently included morale-boosting messages aimed towards strengthening the endurance of citizens during the crisis; for example, “It will take perseverance and strength on the part of each of us – but together we will succeed” (Löfven, 2020b). Fredriksen, on the other hand, primarily expressed empathy with people and groups that were affected by the pandemic, and gratitude for efforts by various people and groups: “I know how much this situation demands of you. Thank you for the great effort” (Fredriksen, 2020a). In a series of Instagram posts, she shared Covid-19–related stories depicting ordinary people and workers and expressed empathy with and gratitude towards them. The posts told the stories of, among others, a chronically ill girl, a midwife, a cleaner, and a dustman.

Discussion

Similarities and differences in Nordic health authorities’ Covid-19 communication on Twitter

The Nordic health authorities included in our study showed several interesting similarities in their communication on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic’s first wave. All four health authorities most commonly interacted with other

government organisations on Twitter, which corroborates the findings from the US and Italy (Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). Even in other cases of social media communication, government agencies tend to engage with organisations already in their communication circles (Liu & Xu, 2019; Wukich & Mergel, 2016). In contrast, the low level of interaction with political officials may reflect Nordic health authorities' need to not politicise their own communication by intertwining it with politicians' messages, and instead to manifest their role as professional civil servants. The Nordic public health authorities may also perceive themselves as independent agencies, although in practice, this independence varies between public administrative systems in the Nordic countries. Likewise, all the Nordic health authorities in our study largely refrained from engaging with national or international scientific organisations. Overall, this may reflect their self-perceived role as experts on matters regarding public health. As discussed previously, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health still provided information about scientific research outside their organisational boundaries, even though the authority did not explicitly refer to specific organisations.

The health authorities in all four countries frequently aimed at providing the public with instructions via Twitter. This is well in line with theoretical approaches stating that instructive information is most important during the early stages of a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Sturges, 1994). The focus on instructions by the Nordic health authorities during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic implies that they recognised the need for guidance among the public and specified appropriate actions to be taken or behavioural guidelines to be followed. Thus, the public health authorities took a strong role in each country as the government agency with appropriate expertise to provide the public with guidelines.

The Danish Health Authority pursued several different communication strategies on Twitter than its Nordic counterparts. First, they interacted frequently with nongovernmental organisations, which are essential for the general public during crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic (Akingbola, 2020). Frequent interaction with nongovernmental organisations may improve agency communication to the public and further an agency's "understanding of different social groups and help NGOs cater to vulnerable groups" (Tagliacozzo et al., 2021: 947). Against this background, the Danish Health Authority outperformed other Nordic health authorities by publicly interacting with nongovernmental organisations on Twitter.

Nongovernmental organisations are also essential actors for psychosocial support during crises. Therefore, it is possible that there is a connection between the Danish Health Authority's more frequent engagement with relevant societal actors and the agency's remarkable proportion of supportive tweets, which stood out in comparison with the other health authorities. Communicative demands to prevent anxiety and fatigue, as well as create empathy (Coombs,

2020), were therefore more likely fulfilled by the Danish health authority than by its Nordic counterparts. The Public Health Agency of Sweden illustrated the lowest rate of supportive messages on Twitter. The reasons for this restriction could not be investigated as part of this study. The organisation may not have recognised the necessity to provide more psychosocial support to the public, illustrated by a statement that mental well-being in Sweden had been affected less by the pandemic since restrictions were less strict (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020).

Finally, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health had a much larger focus on reputational messages than the other Nordic health authorities. In the early stages of the pandemic, there were claims about disagreements between the government and the expert agency, which, although denied by the agency (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020), may have increased the need to rebuild reputation. Reputation-reinforcing messages are generally limited to the phase when the crisis is mostly over (Sturges, 1994). Thus, it is remarkable that Nordic health authorities tweeted reputational messages within only one week of the World Health Organization's declaration of a pandemic, implying that they engaged in reputation-building from the start of the pandemic instead of waiting until less urgent stages of the crisis.

Similarities and differences in Nordic prime ministers' Covid-19 communication on Instagram

The analysis of how Nordic prime ministers as political leaders communicated the Covid-19 crisis on Instagram revealed similarities as well as differences in approaches. Regarding interaction, a main similarity across the communication by the three Nordic prime ministers is that the core actors of the Covid-19 crisis management – the government, governmental organisations, and health-related agencies – were usually in focus in the posts. Hence, the prime ministers mainly interacted with organisations and actors within the state administrative system. However, Löfven paid attention to efforts made during the pandemic by non-governmental organisations to a higher extent than his Nordic counterparts did. A second similarity is that all the prime ministers frequently appealed for solidarity in their messages during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is a finding that is consistent with previous studies (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021a) (for a discussion of how the different government-public administration relations in the Scandinavian countries influenced the different expressions of the common sense of solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic, see Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3).

Beyond similarities, our analysis has detected differences between the communicative profiles of the Nordic prime ministers. Obviously, the most marked difference in the approaches is between the Swedish and the Danish prime

ministers. In Sweden, Löfven typically provided instructive messages, strongly appealed for solidarity, and additionally aimed at boosting the morale of the citizens. The general impression is of a paternalistic leader talking *to* the people during the crisis. This is underlined by numerous video clips from press briefings where he alone delivered messages to Swedes from a podium. Fredriksen, in contrast, primarily emerged as a supportive and compassionate leader who was interactive and involved *with* the people by communicating gratitude to the public and groups for various efforts and recognising the citizens' hardships of coping with the crisis by expressing empathy. In all, she appears as an authentic and affective political leader during the pandemic.

As both Löfven and Fredriksen are Social Democrats, it would be tempting to interpret the differences in communication approaches between them in the perspective of gendered political leadership styles. Differences in emotional communication styles have been brought forward as one significant divergence between female and male leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dehingia et al., 2021; Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2020). However, such an interpretation would not be fully accurate considering the results here, inasmuch as Marin, also a Social Democrat, did not communicate in a similar way as her Danish female colleague. Marin, acting in the role of head of government, interacted with her government, talked about governmental actions, and additionally, albeit to a lesser degree, called for solidarity and boosted morale. Supportive messages and affective ways to communicate support were not prevalent in her posts.

In sum, the studied Nordic prime ministers exhibited similar practices in their social media communication regarding interaction in the content with organisations and actors in their surroundings, but diverging approaches vis-à-vis how communication objectives were emphasised and the kind of leadership style that was projected to the public during the crisis.

Conclusions

Juxtaposing the main findings from the two case studies, a first observation is that both the Nordic health authorities and prime ministers primarily interacted with various governmental and administrative organisations and actors in their messages. This leads to the conclusion that comparatively homogenous communication ecologies in crisis management were formed in the Nordic countries. These ecologies focus on governmental and administrative actors, while mostly excluding other external actors. Still, the efforts of nongovernmental organisations during the Covid-19-crisis were recognised, mostly by the Danish health authority and the Swedish prime minister.

A second conclusion based on comparing the findings from the case studies is that the Nordic health authorities and prime ministers as political leaders,

although belonging to the same communication networks, pursued different but complementary objectives in their crisis communication on social media. During the first wave of the pandemic, the Nordic health authorities mostly provided instructions to the public, whereas the prime ministers mainly delivered (emotional) support to the people. These differences can be understood through the different roles and role perceptions that the actors have in managing crises. Beyond providing encouraging support to the people (boosting morale, instilling hope, showing empathy, and recognising efforts), Nordic political leaders frequently appealed to their citizens to stand together by calling for solidarity during the crisis.

As pointed out earlier, although the political and administrative systems and traditions in the Nordic countries exhibit many similarities, there were substantial differences in management strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the countries were impacted differently. These contextual factors probably had a bearing on the communication strategies chosen by the health authorities and political leaders during the first wave of the pandemic. A striking observation when juxtaposing the findings across actor types is that the Danish Health Authority and the Danish prime minister stand out in both case studies by showing a clear focus on communicating emotional support to the public. This could imply that the overall goal of the Danish actors' communication strategies was more focused on providing psychosocial and emotional support to the public than in other Nordic countries. Moreover, the strong focus on recommendations of behaviour instead of legal restrictions in the Swedish management of the pandemic is, possibly, reflected in the finding that the prevalence of guidance and instructions in the Swedish health authority's messages (30%) was paralleled in the posts by the Swedish prime minister (45%).

Our study has contributed with novel empirical knowledge on crisis communication on social media by authorities and leaders. The results are important for communication about future pandemics and societal crises. Still, the findings should be interpreted with some caution, since the coding of the data is not completely transferable due to differences in the type of actors and in the social media platforms studied. Suggestions for further research are to examine the effects of different communication objectives in social media posts on user reactions, but also the effects on the willingness to follow recommendations and the evaluation of the actors. Although differences between the style and tone of instructions were notable in the empirical analysis, this study did not explore whether instructions fulfilled the communicative demand of efficacy, which is another avenue for future research. Our study furthermore noted that political leaders employ different visual framings of their messages (e.g., press conference footage vs. imagery of affected ordinary people), thus suggesting that future studies should include visual analyses of crisis communication on social media (see Drylie-Carey et al., 2020; see also Almlund et al., Chapter 6,

for an examination of the differences in Covid-19 poster campaigns in Scandinavia). Finally, since previous research on Covid-19 has focused extensively on the initial phase of the crisis, we lack any knowledge of how the social media communication by authorities and leaders developed during the later stages of the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

The analysis of the health authorities' Twitter use was carried out by Frederike Albrecht and Helena Hermansson, with the assistance of students. Master's student Mikael Forsén coded the tweets by the Finnish health authority, and master's student Mattias Forsberg the tweets by the Norwegian equivalent. Jenny Lindholm and Tom Carlson carried out the analysis of the prime ministers' Instagram use.

References

- Akingbola, K. (2020). Covid-19: The prospects for nonprofit human resource management. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, 11(1), 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjnsr.2020v11n1a372>
- Austin, L. L., Liu, B. F., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498>
- Bjørkdahl, K., Kjeldsen, J. E., Stor Villadsen, L., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Argumentum ad solidarietatem: Rhetorical strategies of Scandinavian political leaders during Covid-19. In M. Lewis, E. Govender, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating Covid-19: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 163–184). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_9
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Brummette, J., & Sisco, H. F. (2015). Using Twitter as a means of coping with emotions and uncontrollable crises. *Public Relations Review*, 41(1), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.009>
- Ceccobelli, D., & Vaccari, C. (2021). A virus in the hybrid media system: How the Conte government communicated the coronavirus crisis. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13(2), 259–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2021.1906529>
- Christensen, T., & Lægreid, P. (2020). The coronavirus crisis – crisis communication, meaning-making, and reputation management. *International Public Management Journal*, 23(5), 713–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2020.1812455>
- Cinelli, M., Quattrococchi, W., Galeazzi, A., Valensise, C. A., Brugnoli, E., Schmidt, A. L., Zola, P., Zollo, F., & Scala, A. (2020). The Covid-19 social media infodemic. *Scientific Reports*, 10, 16598. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>
- Comfort, L. K. (2007). Crisis management in hindsight: Cognition, communication, coordination, and control. *Public Administration Review*, 67(S1), 189–197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00827.x>
- Coombs, W. T. (2020). Public sector crises: Realizations from Covid-19 for crisis communication. *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 13(2), 990–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v13i2p990>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16(2), 165–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089331802237233>
- Dehingia, N., Dey, A., & Raj, A. (2021). Gender differences in social media communication by national leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Big Data and Gender in the Age of Covid-19: A Brief Series from UC San Diego*. University of California San Diego.

- https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/UCSD-Brief-5_BigDataGenderCOVID19_SocialMediaDifferences.pdf
- Drylie-Carey, L. Sánchez-Castillo, S., & Galán-Cubillo, E. (2020). European leaders unmasked: Covid-19 communication strategy through Twitter. *Profesional de la información*, 29(5), e290504. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.sep.04>
- Folkhelseinstituttet [@Folkhelseinst]. (n.d.). *Tweets* [Twitter profile]. Twitter. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/Folkhelseinst>
- Folkhelseinstituttet [@Folkhelseinst]. (2020a, May 6). *The map of Covid-19 research https://fbi.nolen/gk/systematic-reviews-btalmapl... @folkehelsinst makes it easier to produce systematic reviews. What are the burning questions? See [Thumbnail with link attached] [Tweet]*. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Folkhelseinst/status/1257996687609679878>
- Folkhelseinstituttet [@Folkhelseinst]. (2020b, March 18). *I dag klokken 12.00 utenfor Uranienborg hjemmet i @Oslo kommune Sammen med sang og klapping fra ansatte og beboere på sykehjemmet [Today at 12.00 outside Uranienborg hjemmet in @Oslo kommune Along with singing and clapping from staff and residents at the nursing home]* [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Folkhelseinst/status/1240263925616214021>
- Folkhelseinstituttet [@Folkhelseinst]. (2020c, May 12). *Datatilsynet har levert varsel om pålegg til Smittestopp-appen. Risiko- og sårbarhetsanalyser er på plass, og FHI vil være svært nøye [The Norwegian Data Protection Authority has delivered a notice of order to the Contagion stop-app. Risk and vulnerability analyzes are in place, and FHI will be very careful]* [Link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Folkhelseinst/status/1260256683718258688>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (n.d.). *Tweets* [Twitter profile]. Twitter. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/folkhalsomynd>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (2020a, March 19). *Tänk över om resan verkligen är nödvändig [Think about whether the journey is really necessary]* [Thumbnail with link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/folkhalsomynd/status/1240685286448697344>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (2020b, March 12). *Skydda dig och andra. Känner du dig sjuk med snuva, hosta eller feber ska du försöka låta bli att träffa andra [Protect yourself and others. Try not to meet other people if you feel unwell and you have a runny nose, cough, or fever]* [Thumbnail with link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/Folkhalsomynd/status/1238181246934581248?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (2020c, March 18). *Polisen varnar för bedragare som kontaktar äldre personer och erbjuder hjälp med att handla, eller att genomföra coronaprover mot bankuppgifter [The police warn of fraudsters who contact elderly people and offer help with shopping, or to carry out corona tests against bank details]* [Image with link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/folkhalsomynd/status/1240312286205665280>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (2020d, March 14). *SvD/Sifo Högt förtroende för Folkhälsomyndigheten https://svd.se/hogt-fortroende-for-folkhalsomyndigheten... via @SvD [SvD/Sifo High trust for the Folkhälsomyndigheten ...]* [Thumbnail with link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/folkhalsomynd/status/1238735492616683522>
- Folkhälsomyndigheten [@Folkhalsomynd]. (2020e, March 26). *Folkhälsomyndigheten tar initiativ till samverkan för att öka testkapaciteten av covid-19 [The Public Health Agency takes the initiative to collaborate to increase Covid-19 testing capacity]* [Thumbnail with link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/folkhalsomynd/status/1243183804048707584?lang=bg>
- Fredriksen, M. [@mette]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/mette/>
- Fredriksen, M. [@mette]. (2020a, March 27). *Godmorgen alle sammen. Hver dag prøver jeg at starte dagen med lidt frisk luft til krop og sjæl. Jeg ved [Good morning everyone. Every day I try to start the day with a little fresh air for body and soul. I know]* [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-OfBQqAWAh/>
- Fredriksen, M. [@mette]. (2020b, March 30). *Der er lys for enden af tunnelen, hvis vi holder fast. Og holder afstand. Vi har reageret hurtigt for at [There is light at the end of the tunnel, if we persevere. And keep distance. We have reacted quickly to]* [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-XcW80gIcT/>

- Gigliotti, R. A. (2016). Leader as performer; leader as human: A discursive and retrospective construction of crisis leadership. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 24(4), 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2016.1208660>
- Graham, M. W., Avery, E. J., & Park, S. (2015). The role of social media in local government crisis communications. *Public Relations Review*, 41(3), 386–394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.02.001>
- Grebel'sky-Lichtman, T., & Katz, R. (2020). Gender effect on political leaders' nonverbal communicative structure during the Covid-19 crisis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(21), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17217789>
- Guidry, J. P., Jin, Y., Orr, C. A., Messner, M., & Meganck, S. (2017). Ebola on Instagram and Twitter: How health organisations address the health crisis in their social media engagement. *Public Relations Review*, 43(3), 477–486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.04.009>
- Hall, K., & Wolf, M. (2021). Whose crisis? Pandemic flu, “communication disasters” and the struggle for hegemony. *Health*, 25(3), 322–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459319886112>
- Haman, M. (2020). The use of Twitter by state leaders and its impact on the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Heliyon*, 6(11), e05540. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05540>
- Holmes, B. J., Henrich, N., Hancock, S., & Lestou, V. (2009). Communicating with the public during health crises: Experts' experiences and opinions. *Journal of Risk Research*, 12(6), 793–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669870802648486>
- Houston, B. J. (2021). Covid-19 communication ecologies: Using interpersonal, organizational, and mediated communication resources to cope with a pandemic. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 887–892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992837>
- Johanson, M. (2020, August 4). ‘Samfundssind’: How a long-forgotten word rallied a nation. BBC Worklife. www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200802-how-the-long-forgotten-word-samfundssin-rallied-a-nation
- Kapucu, N. (2006). Interagency communication networks during emergencies: Boundary spanners in multiagency coordination. *American Review of Public Administration*, 36(2), 207–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074005280605>
- Kouzy R., Abi Jaoude, J., Kraitem, A., El Alam, M. B., Karam, B., Adib, E., Zarka, J., Traboulsi, C., Akl, E. W., & Baddour, K. (2020). Coronavirus goes viral: Quantifying the Covid-19 misinformation epidemic on Twitter. *Cureus*, 12(3), e7255. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7255>
- Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (2021a). Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in global comparative perspective. In D. G. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 333–350). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (Eds.) (2021b). *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Liu, W., & Xu, W. (2019). Tweeting to (selectively) engage: How government agencies target stakeholders on Twitter during Hurricane Harvey. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 4917–4939. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11588>
- Löfven, S. [@stefanlofven]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/stefanlofven/>
- Löfven, S. [@stefanlofven]. (2020a, March 16). Jag vill vända mig direkt till personal inom hälso- och sjukvården, som arbetar dag och natt för att vårda sjuka [I want to turn directly to the staff in the healthcare system, who work day and night to care for the sick] [Video]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9zDnnWnCJ9/>
- Löfven, S. [@stefanlofven]. (2020b, April 17). Antalet tester för Covid-19 utökas kraftigt. Vi har en allvarlig situation i äldreomsorgen. I så gott som samtliga län finns [The number of tests for Covid-19 is greatly increased. We have a serious situation in elderly care. Available in almost all counties] [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_E838cnQ06/
- Marin, S. [@sannamarin]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/sannamarin/>

- Marin, S. [@sannamarin]. (2020, April 16). *Tänään Ylen aamun vieraana keskustelemassa mm. eilisestä hallituksen päätöksestä purkaa Uudenmaan eristys. Eristys oli purettava, koska Uudenmaan maakunnan sulkeminen ei* [Today, as a guest of Yle morning, discussing, e.g., about yesterday's government decision to dismantle the isolation of Uusimaa. The isolation had to be dismantled, because the closure of the Uusimaa province did not] [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_7Ik0Boqx/
- Norwegian Institute of Public Health [Folkhelseinstituttet]. (2020, March 26). *Ikke på kollisjonskurs* [Not on a collision course] [Press release].
- Olsson, E. K. (2014). Crisis communication in public organisations: Dimensions of crisis communication revisited. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 22(2), 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12047>
- Ozanne, L. K., Ballantine, P. W., & Mitchell, T. (2020). Investigating the methods and effectiveness of crisis communication. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 32(4), 379–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2020.1798856>
- Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten]. (2020). Påverkar covid-19-pandemin befolkningens psykiska hälsa? [Does the covid-19 pandemic affect the mental health of the population?]. *Rapid Review*, nr. 20116.
- Rao, H. R., Vemprala, N., Akello, P., & Valecha, R. (2020). Retweets of officials' alarming vs. reassuring messages during the Covid-19 pandemic: Implications for crisis management. *International Journal of Information Management*, 55, 102187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102187>
- Rosenberg, H., Syed, S., & Rezaie, S. (2020). The Twitter pandemic: The critical role of Twitter in the dissemination of medical information and misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 22(4), 418–421. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cem.2020.361>
- Rufai, S. R., & Bunce, C. (2020). World leaders' usage of Twitter in response to the Covid-19 pandemic: A content analysis. *Journal of Public Health*, 42(3), 510–516. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa049>
- Rullo, L. (2021). The Covid-19 pandemic crisis and the personalization of the government in Italy. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 17(2), 196–207. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-08-2020-0083>
- Spence, P. R., Lachlan, K. A., Lin, X., & del Greco, M. (2015). Variability in Twitter content across the stages of a natural disaster: Implications for crisis communication. *Communication Quarterly*, 63(2), 171–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2015.1012219>
- Sturges, D. L. (1994). Communicating through crisis: A strategy for organisational survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7(3), 297–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318994007003004>
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [@SSTSundhed]. (n.d.). *Tweets* [Twitter profile]. Twitter. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/sstsundhed>
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [@SSTSundhed]. (2020a, March 25). *Det er vigtigt at huske den mentale sundhed under #coronavirus-epidemien. Vi har udarbejdet 11 gode råd til, hvad man kan* [It's important to remember mental health during the #coronavirus epidemic. We have prepared 11 good tips for what you can do] [Image attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/SSTSundhed/status/1242835277078462466>
- Sundhedsstyrelsen [@SSTSundhed]. (2020b, April 15). *Coronavirus-epidemien har stor indflydelse på de fleste familiers hverdag, og for familier med børn og unge med psykisk sårbarhed kan* [The coronavirus epidemic has a major impact on most families' everyday life, and for families with children and young people with mental vulnerability can] [Image and link attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/SSTSundhed/status/1250437600340365315>
- Tagliacozzo, S., Albrecht, F., & Ganapati, N. E. (2021). International perspectives on Covid-19 communication ecologies: Public health agencies' online communication in Italy, Sweden, and the United States. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 934–955. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992832>
- Terveystieteiden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos [THLorg]. (n.d.). *Tweets* [Twitter profile]. Twitter. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/thlorg>
- Wang, Y., Hao, H., & Platt, L. S. (2021). Examining risk and crisis communications of government

- agencies and stakeholders during early-stages of Covid-19 on Twitter. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 114, 106568. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106568>
- Wooten, L. P., & James, E. H. (2008). Linking crisis management and leadership competencies: The role of human resource development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 10(3), 352–379. <https://doi.org/0.1177/1523422308316450>
- Wukich, C., & Mergel, I. (2016). Reusing social media information in government. *Government Information Quarterly*, 33(2), 305–312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2016.01.011>

Corporate crisis management

Managing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

Finn Frandsen & Winni Johansen

Department of Management, Aarhus University, Denmark, and Department of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School, Norway

Abstract

This chapter presents main challenges to the field of corporate crisis management and crisis communication, as well as to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite variations in state strategies for dealing with Covid-19, conditions and ways of handling the crisis of the SMEs appear to be quite similar in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, lending confirmation to the idea of a specific Nordic model. As SMEs were not prepared for this type of crisis, many of them turned to their trade associations for help in dealing with the problems created by the pandemic (lockdown, no income, lay-offs, etc.). Hence, based on a small explorative study, we also discuss in this chapter the role and communication of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public in the rhetorical arena of the Covid-19 pandemic. The trade associations succeeded in increasing the media coverage of SMEs, which had an important impact on solutions such as state support packages and the communication with members (extra-communication) and staff despite lockdown and remote work.

Keywords: corporate crisis management, internal crisis communication, SME resilience, trade associations, Covid-19, extra-communication

Introduction

When a community falls victim to an epidemic or a pandemic, different types of social actors or stakeholders contribute to the construction of what Andrew Lakoff (2019) names an “epidemic emergency”. This has also been the case in

Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2023). Corporate crisis management: Managing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 173–194). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-8>

relation to Covid-19 in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, since the beginning of 2020. Focus has traditionally been on 1) the citizens who live in countries affected by epidemics or pandemics, 2) public authorities (such as health authorities and the police) who control a good part of the restrictions, including the use of facemasks, 3) politicians and political parties who form the governments, 4) experts, 5) activists, and 6) the news media.

However, corporations are also victims of a pandemic. In fact, one of the interesting characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic is the highly active role played by corporations, their leaders, and employees – as well as by trade associations – from the beginning. Although Covid-19 has not been harmful to all companies, many have been severely affected by the lockdown or restrictions introduced by the governments and health authorities in the Nordics. In particular, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have had difficulties in surviving the consequences of long-term lockdowns, or in having an impact on the governmental decisions during the pandemic. For that reason, many of them turned to their trade associations for help. Thus, the important role played by the trade associations is another interesting characteristic of the pandemic.

Trade associations are also known as metaorganisations, or the “organizations of organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). During the Covid-19 pandemic, they acted as crisis communicators in the media and as public affairs officers on behalf of their members. Trade associations, as well as unions, have played an active role in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Hence, the corporatist tradition and the specific Nordic model (welfare state, economic policy, and organised work life) has influenced the handling of the pandemic (Ihlen et al., 2022; Fløtten & Trygstad, 2020).

The aim of this chapter is to study corporate crisis management and crisis communication in the Scandinavian countries during Covid-19 and to discuss the following three research questions:

- RQ1. What have been the main challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ2. How have corporations (in particular, SMEs) in the Scandinavian countries handled Covid-19?
- RQ3. What has been the role of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden communicating on behalf of an industry and acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic?

First, we briefly present a crisis management framework that takes the interdependencies between public crisis management, political crisis management, and corporate crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic into account.

This is done to discuss the role of corporate crisis management in the overall field of crisis management. During the pandemic, corporations have had to navigate between restrictions from health authorities, political decisions from government (e.g., lockdowns), and the (financial) survival of their business, making it a very complex situation.

Next, we present the specific challenges to the field of corporate crisis management and crisis communication of corporations created by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Scandinavian countries. This includes a brief discussion of crisis types and dynamics; anticipation and resilience; and external and internal crisis communication, followed by a short presentation of SME strategies for coping with the crisis.

Finally, we present the results of a small explorative study based on statements and semi-structured interviews with chief communication officers of four trade associations within the hospitality industry that has been severely affected by Covid-19 (Breier et al., 2021): HORESTA (www.horesta.dk) and SMVdanmark (www.smvdanmark.dk) in Denmark; NHO (www.nho.no) in Norway; and Visita (www.visita.se) in Sweden. These interviews were conducted in late 2021, and referred to as TA1, TA2, TA3, and TA4, respectively, when quoted in this chapter. We discuss the key challenges of SMEs as perceived by the trade associations, as well as the role and communication of the four trade associations speaking on behalf of the industry and acting as intermediaries (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015) between companies, government, media, and the public in the rhetorical arena of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The role of corporate crisis management in an overall framework

Instead of considering crisis management as one big, unified field of study, or as many small disciplines able to represent the whole, we argue that the field of crisis management and crisis communication can be reframed into three subfields.

Three subfields of crisis management

We propose a new model according to which there exists three interrelated subfields within crisis management: 1) public crisis management, 2) political crisis management, and 3) corporate crisis management. Instead of public crisis management, we sometimes talk about emergency management or disaster management. By subfield, we understand “a set of more or less institutionalized policies, programs, and practices that are connected to a specific sector of society defined as an interinstitutional system” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b:

61). In our work, we have been inspired by the institutional logics' perspective (Thornton et al., 2012).

Figure 8.1 *Three interrelated subfields within crisis management*



Source: Adapted from Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b: 61

As it appears from Figure 8.1, the three subfields are interrelated and interdependent of one another during crises. They are governed by specific institutional logics built around a series of crisis-related tasks that are taken in charge by specific key actors and organisations in specific sectors. All three subfields have an overall goal of handling crises for the sake of citizens, society, and organisations, and are actively dealing with the crisis stage. However, they differ in relation to main focus and they can be said to pay more attention to a specific stage in the life cycle of a crisis compared with the other subfields.

Public crisis management typically has a focus on public safety and on the crisis stage: Emergency is about reacting once a crisis hits, and about risk and crisis communication to reduce risk and harm to citizens (Seeger et al., 2020). Political crisis management has a focus on political power and on the post-crisis stage: Managing a crisis is also about maintaining or gaining power once a crisis is over. Blame games (Hood, 2011), framing contests, and crisis exploitation (Boin et al., 2009, 2017) – as well as official commissions of inquiries (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010) – are typically part of the post-crisis stage. Finally, corporate crisis management has a focus on corporate reputation and on the

pre-crisis stage: how to avoid crises and manage reputation. In this chapter, we concentrate on the corporations (for elaboration of the two first subfields, see Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b).

Covid-19 and the relations among crisis management subfields

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the public, political, and corporate crisis management subfields clearly interacted and were mutually interdependent on one another. On the one hand, corporations must navigate between a health crisis (following the restrictions and instructions of the health authorities and the government) and a business crisis (due to the consequences of the public and political handling of the health crisis). The business crisis, for some organisations, involves lockdown, business disruption, lay-offs, and the risk of business collapse following the rules and regulations of the government. On the other hand, society is dependent on business and organisations (e.g., for the economy) and on the well-being of citizens and the workforce. This means that the government must also listen to and assist companies in surviving the crisis, for instance, by creating a financial instrument, such as support or compensation packages, introduced early in the crisis in all three Scandinavian countries. Government and authorities must also listen to the intermediaries (e.g., trade associations and trade unions) because they can inform them about the situation and needs of their members. In fact, employer associations in some cases played a very important role for governmental decisions. Consider, for instance, the impact that Norwegian employer organisations had on the governmental decision to make an exception to the rules of quarantine and open the borders for immigrant workers to Norway – a decision that had large consequences for the second wave of Covid-19 in Norway (Røed-Johansen et al., 2020). Although public crisis management and political crisis management were the most visible fields during the Covid-19 pandemic, corporate crisis management also played an important role.

Sweden decided not to impose a lockdown in early 2020, in contrast to Denmark and Norway, but citizens decided, voluntarily, to maintain social distance and work from home. According to the chief communication officer at the Swedish trade association, Visita, which represents the Swedish hospitality industry,

there has been a lot of discussion about the Swedish Covid-19 strategy, and formally, there was a difference between us and Norway or Denmark, but practically, it was not that big of a difference, because there were a lot of recommendations, advice, and so on. It was very clear that they did not want people to travel, or see each other, or go to restaurants, etcetera. We have been fighting for letting people know that even though we did not have a formal lockdown, it was a kind of lockdown anyway. (TA4)

As it appears above, despite variations in strategies and in interactions between health authorities and governments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, corporations – including SMEs – experienced the same kind of consequences to their businesses: lockdown, lay-offs, remote work, income problems, and clients staying away.

Challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication

Corporate crisis management has a focus on the reputation (and survival) of the organisation and on how to avoid crisis (the pre-crisis stage), applying a strategic, proactive, process-oriented approach to management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Key actors are private and public organisations as well as intermediaries, such as industry and trade associations representing company members and unions representing the workforce.

The life cycle approach, or staged approach (before, during, and after a crisis) (Coombs, 2019; Fink, 1986/2000; Mitroff, 1994), is a predominant approach within the field when working in practice with crisis management. It includes the pre-crisis stage (signal detection and preventing and preparing for crisis); the crisis stage (recognition, containment, and recovery); and the post-crisis stage (evaluation, institutional memory – or learning – and post-crisis actions) (Coombs, 2019). Such a life-cycle approach is based on an understanding of a crisis as being linear and sequential; however, this is not necessarily the case. The business consequences of Covid-19 do not necessarily constitute a crisis for all companies simultaneously or to the same extent, and tools such as risk, issues, and stakeholder management – or learning and change communication – do not only play out in the pre-crisis stage or in the post-crisis stage, but during *all* stages (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Jaques, 2014).

Anticipation and resilience are key dimensions within crisis management. Although, a narrowly planned, prescriptive approach to crisis management still plays an important role for anticipating crises, a newer and broader approach combining a planned and an emergent approach to crisis management has gained traction (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In an emergent approach to crisis management, focus is on a plan B, and on what to do when plan A fails. This includes dimensions such as contingency, improvisation, situational diagnosis, and resilience. As almost no companies or governments had anticipated the pandemic and its consequences, an emergent approach to Covid-19 was important, including a need for improvisation (Roux-Dufort & Vidaillet, 2003) and resilience, defined as “the capacity to withstand unanticipated dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back” (Wildavsky, 1988: 17).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned out to be a long-term crisis. We have been witnessing second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic,

“corona fatigue”, as well as disagreements among health experts, politicians, and organisations for or against specific strategies (e.g., face masks or vaccination; lockdown or reopening; remote work or not). Decisions and communication strategies have been changed several times as we learned from the crisis, and organisations have had to adapt their crisis management strategies accordingly along the way.

Corporate crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

Crisis communication within corporate crisis management has a focus on crisis response strategies, as in Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015) or Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2019). However, today, the field also includes a complexity approach, focusing on communicative complexity and multiple and dynamic voices. Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, 2020a) represents such a multivocal approach to crisis communication. We argue that communication during a crisis takes place not only between an organisation (public, political, or corporate) and its stakeholders, but between multiple voices that interact with one another and communicate *to*, *with*, *against*, *past*, or *about* each other in the rhetorical arena that opens when a crisis breaks out. Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) is an agonistic model, and not all voices are looking for dialogue and consensus.

Covid-19 has affected whole societies. Multiple voices across the three subfields have communicated with different agendas in this arena – not all of them were searching for consensus. Dissensus and polarisation also played out, for example, in vaccination versus anti-vaccination groups. Some voices were more powerful and resourceful than others. Trade associations are more resourceful and have easier access to media compared with, especially, SMEs; however, they still need to navigate among multiple voices that have different agendas and goals. As it appears from the explorative study presented later in this chapter, the communication activities of SMEs and their trade associations form specific patterns of interaction in the Covid-19 crisis arena.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, internal communication in companies was about internal risk, change, and crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) to deal with the health issues. However, it has also been about crisis communication related to business consequences, such as financial and market issues, restructuring, lay-offs, and human resource issues. Sense-making (Weick, 1995) – how to make sense of what is happening – has been the key for leaders and employees. Lockdown periods and employees working from home create a need for changes of internal communication (content, channels, technology). Furthermore, the long-term crisis has called for new communication strategies to embrace corona fatigue, including a discourse of renewal (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020) to regain optimism among staff.

Crisis types and crisis dynamics

The Covid-19 pandemic can be characterised as a global crisis, and companies all over the world have been affected. According to the crisis clusters as detailed by Coombs, Covid-19 is a victim crisis. Such a crisis makes stakeholders attribute only a low degree of responsibility to an organisation, compared to, for instance, an accident or a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2019). However, crises are dynamic, and even if the triggering event is external, as in this case, and not caused by the organisation, a victim crisis can lead to other kinds of crises due, for instance, to the handling of the crisis (see the extended crisis portfolio model of Frandsen & Johansen, 2017: 49).

With Covid-19, organisations not only have to deal with the health and safety issues related to the virus, but also with the consequences to their business of the lockdown and closing of the borders applied as an instrument by the Scandinavian governments in March 2020. Two crises at the same time.

Furthermore, if organisations handle the crisis communication or crisis management in an inappropriate or unethical way, they also risk criticism. Do the companies really need to downsize or reduce number of staff? Are they primarily thinking about profit and business? Do they care about the societal problems created by the pandemic? Are they open and honest in their communication? These are some of the questions raised by their stakeholders. Such criticism can turn a victim crisis into a double crisis, defined as “a crisis where a communication crisis overlaps the original crisis in so far as the organisation in crisis is not able to manage the communication processes that should contribute to the handling of the original crisis” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017: 39). If not the whole business, then at least their reputation may be at stake.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed companies making mistakes and acting in ways that could be considered inappropriate, for instance, in relation to receiving financial support (compensation or loans). This has created debates in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden about which companies are most in need of support. During the lockdown period, a large Danish company within the clothing industry, Bestseller, had to apologise for applying for reduction of rent for its boutiques located in city centres. Small boutiques need this kind of support, but it is questionable whether a huge company earning millions does (Jyllands-Posten, 2020). In contrast, we have also met companies behaving as corporate citizens, assisting and offering their help to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their reputation. To illustrate, the Danish supermarket chain Kvickly donated its surplus earned on nonfood-sales to small boutiques struggling to survive during the lockdown (Brieghel, 2021).

When looking at the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, organisations and industries have been affected differently. Klyver and Nielsen (2021b) have

distinguished between three categories of organisations: crisis exploiters (experienced growth); crisis immunes (unaffected); and crisis victims (suffering). In their study of crisis strategies of 350 SMEs in Denmark during the Covid-19 pandemic, Klyver and Nielsen (2021a) found 38 per cent victims, 32 per cent exploiters, and 30 per cent immune.

For some organisations and industries, the crisis has become an opportunity for increasing the market and for creating new solutions and innovation within business; for instance, grocery stores have increased sales and hired more staff (Dansk Industri, 2020). For other sectors, the crisis has meant lockdown, disruptions, and a risk of going out of business. However, once it is over, some organisations can turn back to business with only minor adjustments (e.g., hairdressers and similar professions), whereas for other organisations, core activities are challenged, and they will need new business models to adapt to new behaviours among citizens and customers for long-term survival. This is, for instance, the case of the traveling industry and airline companies. Also, industries in the Nordics who depend on international human resources, or are experiencing international supply chain challenges, may want to rethink risks and vulnerabilities.

SMEs and crisis strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in Scandinavia

What have been the characteristics of the crisis management of organisations in Scandinavia? Let's take a closer look, especially at the many SMEs that account for up to 99 per cent of companies in the Nordics. SMEs have specific challenges compared with bigger companies during the pandemic.

How prepared are the organisations for crises?

According to a small explorative study on crisis preparedness of Norwegian SMEs conducted in 2021, 50 out of 87 companies did not have a crisis plan when the Covid-19 pandemic began (Johansen et al., 2022). According to the chief communicator officer of the Danish trade association HORESTA, “some companies have crisis plans but many of the SMEs do not have a plan, or if they have a plan, it does not include pandemics and lockdown” (TA1). This means that the pandemic, causing lockdowns and closing of borders, is a shock to most companies. They must determine how to deal with the crisis and the changes needed overnight. Yet, the most important challenge to the SMEs is of financial nature: no income.

A longitudinal study (entitled Reboot SME) following SMEs in Denmark since the beginning of Covid-19 – early 2020 until January 2022 – presented the first results in December 2020. At that point in time, responses show that

SMEs mostly need a new management strategy that focuses on agility, organisational design, and not least communication to deal with the crisis at this initial stage (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020). Communication is needed with both clients and staff to make “the management strategy more visible and securing transparency of the actual situation, the roles and the new guidelines”, and communication is seen as “decisive for how the customers, the suppliers and the employees react to the situation” (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020: 4). As for the nature of communication, there is a special focus on “the transition from in-person communication to digital and virtual fora”, and SMEs report that they have used “immense energy on online management (Skype, Teams, etc.) and on written communication to all employees” (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020: 4).

In January 2022, Frederiksen and his research team of Reboot SME published new results which demonstrate that companies who have strategies for innovation and for dealing with various future-oriented scenarios are best at dealing with the initial stages of the crisis. Furthermore, having a cost buffer and strategies for diversification of supply chains are also important to being less vulnerable to a crisis such as Covid-19 in the future (Schröder, 2022; Jensen et al., 2021).

How do the SMEs deal with internal crisis management and communication?

As many of the SMEs are forced to have a lockdown, they must send home or lay off staff. They also have to learn about distant leadership, and the specific challenges related to communication and remote work. This includes (online) communication to create cohesion and a sense of belonging, to create safety and comfort, to compensate for the lack of informal and social communication among co-workers, and to create well-being, by mitigating the feeling of isolation, loneliness, and ingroup–outgroup issues (Frandsen & Johansen, 2021).

However, many organisations express that they are quick to adapt to the technological changes needed for this new virtual working day (Johansen et al., 2022). Meetings on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and similar platforms were quickly established. Webinars and an increase in written communication became part of normal and daily internal communication. In fact, the technological update and transformation of many organisations seemed to happen overnight and was considered one of the opportunities and positive learnings from the Covid-19 crisis (Johansen et al., 2022).

What kind of help did the SMEs need? First and foremost, many SMEs were dependent on financial support in the form of support packages or loans to deal with the lack of income. However, SMEs who had no crisis plans themselves, or who needed help in interpreting regulations and rules in applying for state

support, typically contacted their trade association to get legal help. But what kind of help did they get, and how did trade associations in Scandinavia assist their members during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Trade associations as crisis managers for SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic

Before we have a look at the trade associations' activities during the Covid-19 crisis, let's briefly look into what defines a trade association.

What is a trade association?

Warner and Martin (1967: 314) define trade associations as “non-profit institutions that operate cooperatively for and among competitive, profit-making [actors] within an industry”. Key words are “cooperation” and “competition”. One may therefore ask: What makes competitors engage in collective action? What kind of tasks can trade associations provide solutions to for their members? This is reflected in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.), where trade associations are defined as,

voluntary associations of business firms organized on a geographic or industrial basis to promote and develop commercial and industrial opportunities within its sphere of operation, to voice publicly the views of members on matters of common interest, or in some cases to exercise some measure of control over prices, output, and channels of distribution.

Internally, trade associations assist their members with information, research, education, certification, and so on, and externally, trade associations act on behalf of their members by, for example, lobbying, public affairs, monitoring policy, and civic practices (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

What makes trade associations interesting to study is their complex nature. All trade associations are structured as meta-organisations, or to put it differently, they are “organizations of organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). The organisation members want to collaborate in a trade association for their common interests, but they are also competitors within the same industry, which may lead to dilemmas or conflicts (Barnett, 2013). Furthermore, as for reputation management, trade associations must take three different levels of reputation into account: 1) the corporate level – that is, the reputation of each individual company; 2) the industry level – that is, the reputation of the industry inside which the member companies operate; and finally, 3) the trade association level – that is, the reputation of the trade association itself (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The reputation of the trade association itself may have an

impact on the attractiveness to new members compared with a competing trade association or the choice of not being a member. This complexity can make it difficult to navigate during crises (see Frandsen & Johansen, 2015).

When it comes to the crisis preparedness of trade associations and their role and function in situations where one or more (if not all) of their members are experiencing a crisis, we know only a little (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018).

An explorative study on the role of trade associations during the Covid-19 pandemic

In the following section, we present some of the insights from a small explorative study on the role and communication of trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in relation to Covid-19 and their way of acting in the rhetorical arena of this global crisis to support their organisational members. We conducted four interviews with the communication directors or vice directors at HORESTA (TA1) and SMVdanmark (TA2) in Denmark, NHO (TA3) in Norway, and Visita (TA4) in Sweden during September–December 2021. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were recorded on Zoom, transcribed, and coded by means of meaning condensation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

We asked the interviewees a series of questions that included how the trade association has dealt with Covid-19 (preparedness, role, communication, stakeholders); how they perceived the reactions, resilience, and handling of Covid-19 by their members; cooperation with other trade associations in the Nordics; and what they have learned from the crisis about themselves, their members, and the needs for communication, counselling, and political influence.

HORESTA (the trade association for Danish hotels and restaurants with 2,000 members) and Visita (the trade association for the Swedish hospitality industry with 5,642 members) mostly have members from within hotels, restaurants, bars, campsites, ski locations, amusement parks, and so on. SMVdanmark (the trade association for small and medium-sized companies in Denmark with 18,000 members) has company members not only from hotels and restaurants but from various SMEs in Denmark. And NHO (the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, with 29,000 members) represents both SMEs and bigger companies as well as a whole series of industries, and it is organised in 16 sectoral federations, including Food, Drink, Norway; Norwegian Hospitality Association; Norwegian Federation of Service Industries and Retail Trade; and so on.

The level of organisation in trade associations is bigger in Norway and Sweden compared with Denmark. Visita is both an organisation for the industry as well as an employers' association that makes agreements with the unions, and NHO is also part of the collective bargaining and forms the counterpart to LO (the Confederation of Trade Unions in Norway). This double function

probably makes it more attractive to become a member of these trade associations. Let's have a look at the findings.

Crisis preparedness and crisis team

All four trade associations included in our study have crisis plans and are working with crisis scenarios, mostly in relation to crises for their members, but none of them have plans for pandemics or lockdowns. Thus, they all recognise that, post-Covid, they will have to adjust their plans to include lockdown scenarios and “prepare for the most urgent challenges such as internal coordination and anchoring of their crisis strategies to have higher impact on decision-making and to create stronger unity” (TA1).

As for their crisis teams, they met every day at the beginning of the pandemic to coordinate and plan the many activities: helping their members, following the press conferences and changes in restrictions and regulations, making analyses among their members, and providing the press, the government, and public agencies with information about the needs and situation of their members. Thus, they worked day and night and had to restructure their human resources to keep up with the speed.

Roles of the trade associations

As for the *roles* of the trade associations, our study shows that the trade associations have enacted various roles during the Covid-19 pandemic: crisis manager to staff; crisis counsellor to members; supporter of the industry (being visible to members, potential members, and the whole industry); media manager; public affairs manager; and information provider feeding the press and politicians with information to have an impact on solutions and decision-making.

First, the trade associations had to handle Covid-19 internally in its own organisation as a crisis manager. Staff was working from home, and they had to deal with many crisis-related activities.

Next, they had to assist especially the SMEs in direct crisis management as a crisis counsellor. Many of the SMEs did not know what to do to survive the crisis, and for that reason, they turned to the trade associations for advice. The SMEs had a strong need for more information, as rules and restrictions kept changing as the pandemic progressed. They needed to understand how to deal with the health instructions, but more importantly, to obtain legal or audit advice on how to follow procedures and rules for obtaining support packages, compensations, loans, or other kinds of financial support from the state in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The trade associations were contacted by SMEs who were “desperate or in panic” (TA4) about how to get through the crisis, as they were lacking liquidity and income. For this reason, some trade associations also had to act as psychologists, dealing with strong emotional reactions and asking their members “to calm down” (TA4).

Recognising the need for help probably made some SMEs sign up for membership of a trade association. In fact, all four trade associations experienced a raise in new members during the Covid-19 pandemic, and as one of them stated, “this is probably due to Covid-19 that made especially SMEs recognise the role of the trade association in this crisis and to benefit from our political work” (TA3). NHO gained 1,500 new members, SMVdanmark 1,000, and HORESTA and Visita both reported that they were growing too, although they also lost some organisations that went out of business due to the crisis.

In contrast to the SMEs, large organisations handle crisis management themselves as public affairs managers, but they especially want trade associations to work at the political level – taking on the public affairs role – to have an impact on the decisions of the government on how to support their industry and themselves. The trade associations felt that they were successful in gaining access to the government, to the health agencies, or to the relevant civil servants. The chief communication officer of Visita described it in the following way:

We have a good connection and a lot of contact with the government. That is something that turned out to be one of the things that were positive about the crisis; that the contact of our industries and organisations with the government improved, and now we need to work for that to continue. (TA4)

However, they also stressed that it can be difficult to make it through the political debate and to get on the political agenda if you do not have investigations and statistics to document the needs. And getting access do not necessarily mean that they get all the needs fulfilled of the SMEs and the hospitality industry.

Finally, the trade associations also have a special role to play in making the needs and crisis situations of their members and industries visible to the politicians, the industry, and the public: media manager and information provider. They must be very active in the rhetorical arena. One way of doing this is to increase the external communication in general, and in particular, the communication with the press. The trade associations were all contacted by the media regularly, but to receive even further media attention, all four of them conducted surveys and analyses among their members to continuously offer new insights and overviews of the challenges and needs of their members. In that way, the decision-making of the government and health agencies could be based on latest insights and conversations with the trade associations around possible solutions and support. SMVdanmark (TA2) told us that they have conducted 97 surveys or studies – at least once every week from March 2020 to December 2021 – to continuously be able to feed media and government agencies with updates and numbers. This led to an increase in media coverage of 400 per cent during the Covid-19 crisis, compared with a normal situation. TA4 confirmed this:

We have been presenting our own statistics, numbers, and news almost every day, and brought that to the media. I think we increased our media impact by around 700 percent, and that was not just because of the media calling us, there is a lot of work behind that number. (TA4)

Also, HORESTA (TA1) and NHO (TA3) report that they have succeeded in an important increase in media coverage compared with normal times, as they have been able to feed the press regularly with relevant crisis insights from their members and industry.

Communication of trade associations

As it appeared from above, the roles as crisis counsellor, information provider, public affairs manager, and media manager are centred on communication. The four trade associations have all experienced a serious workload, using “many, many, many man hours” (TA1) to make all of it work, especially as some of their staff – like everybody else – had to work from home. Not only did they deal with external communication, but also with the extra communication (to their members) and internal communication to their staff in new ways due to the lockdown and staff working from home. Two of the trade associations (TA2 & TA3) emphasised that they consider all communication from their trade association to be member communication, because every time they communicate, it is done on behalf of their members:

The way we think is that everything we do is member communication. If my boss is going to appear in the press and talk about an issue, it is key to ask: Is this relevant to our members? Because we are so big in Norway, we have a high visibility and we are being asked about a lot of topics, and we can talk a lot. So, we try to concentrate and use our communication resources on the things that matter to our members. (TA3)

Internally, in the proper organisation of the trade association, it is important to meet daily in the crisis team or group of directors to update, coordinate, and plan for the day. Furthermore, there is a need to include and inform staff working from home. SMVdanmark (TA2) has a strong focus on daily digital meetings and on assuring a one-to-one personal call to each of them daily, to make them feel involved, as remote staff quickly feels disconnected and left out. Thus, internal coordination is important in such situations.

Communication with members can be named *extra-communication*, and it can be defined as “the communication activities taking place inside a group of organisations (a meta-organisation), to which outsiders do not have access” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015: 265). All four trade associations had to develop new channels for their extra-communication, for several reasons: to keep up

with the need for new information and the speed of updates following every press conference and every new rule or procedure being launched in relation to financial public support; to shift for digital channels as businesses were locked down, and people sent home; and to deal with the immediate problems and worries of their members.

One organisation put up a “corona hotline” and wanted to become the “one-stop place” for their members to get answers to their needs (TA1). Traditional and “slow-moving” newsletters were transformed into “quick news” (newsletters sent out by e-mail immediately once new information is available), and Zoom meetings and webinars were used as a strong alternative to reach across the whole country. NHO (TA3) conducted webinars, sometimes reaching 2,000 participants from all over Norway, corresponding to almost 10 per cent of their members in just one session. Finally, the trade associations also facilitated Facebook groups and social digital networks of, for instance, 10–20 companies, such as “restaurant-clubs” (TA4). Although they were slow at the beginning of the pandemic in embracing new digital technologies, they succeeded in transforming their organisations rather quickly, and all agreed that these new technologies, for example, hybrid meetings, have come to stay, as they offer new possibilities for contact with and among their members.

As for the external communication, all four of them found that they did a good job. As already mentioned, they informed and fed the media with new insights daily or weekly, and they had formal as well as informal meetings with the governmental and health agencies followed by internal updates in the trade associations and among their members. Although it is part of the *raison d’être* of a trade association to reach the media and have a say in the decisions at the political level, it is even more important during serious crises.

On top of this, HORESTA (TA1) and Visita (TA4) also found a need for conducting large campaigns for the sake of their members during a crisis like the pandemic. Inspired by the campaign of HORESTA in Denmark, Visita – together with the union and the Swedish government – launched a “Safe to Visit” campaign to enable people to travel inside of Sweden again. Visita’s communication officer explained it in the following way:

I do not think a big campaign should have changed anything really, but it may be that it would have been good for us, to reach our members and make them feel that Visita is behind them, taking care of their engagement, so to say. (TA4)

Thus, communicating externally with the public and the industry through a campaign works as auto-communication (Christensen, 2018) and shows commitment to their members.

When asked about the long-term crisis and if they experienced any corona fatigue, SMVdanmark’s communication officer emphasised that although “some

may start asking themselves, will this ever stop, or will this become the new normal, helping desperate members is extremely meaningful, and it makes staff very motivated for their daily job during the Covid-19 crisis” (TA2).

Finally, according to the four chief communication officers, the trade associations of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are fulfilling their key mission, and their members are, so far, satisfied with their visibility and performance during the Covid-19 crisis, even though they did not obtain all the financial support they were seeking (full support or compensation versus loans; and short versus long pay-back time of loans).

Interdependencies and patterns of interaction in the rhetorical arena

What do these findings tell us about the interdependencies and patterns of interactions in the rhetorical arena from the perspective of SMEs and trades associations in Scandinavia? Both the voices of SMEs and of trade associations engage in chains or patterns of interactions with other voices in the arena.

As for the SMEs, they feed the trade associations with insights about their needs from surveys and one-to-one conversations, and in return, they receive information, support, and advice from the trade associations directly as well as indirectly through their presence in the media. At the same time, SMEs communicate among themselves through Facebook networks and clubs to learn from one another.

As for trade associations, they engage in at least three different patterns. First, they interact with their members, as described above. Another pattern is that, following every press conference of the government or the health authorities, the trade association informs and guides their members on how to interpret and work with the changing restrictions. Next, they interact with the government and health authorities, indirectly through the media as well as directly through participating in meetings, informing them on the needs of their members and trying to influence decision-making. In this way, trade associations, media, and public authorities are mutually interdependent. Finally, to point to yet another pattern, the trade associations interact with the public – indirectly through the media, and directly through a public campaign – to become visible and show commitment to their SME members, as well as to attract new SME members to their trade organisation. Centrality, intensity, visibility, and interdependency are key words for the voices of the trade associations in the rhetorical arena of Covid-19.

Discussion

What were the most important challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic? As already mentioned,

the long-term crisis of Covid-19 has challenged the traditional approach to crisis management and crisis communication, in particular the insufficiency of the life-cycle approach and the strong need for resilience and an emergent approach to management, as well as new forms of communication to deal with corona fatigue and internal communication during lockdowns.

What were the most interesting findings and contributions of the small explorative study? First and foremost, the study discovered that across the Scandinavian countries, crisis management and crisis communication among SMEs and trade associations during the Covid-19 crisis seemed to be quite similar: same kind of problems, same dynamics and patterns of interactions, and same type of institutional systems.

How did the SMEs within the hospitality industry handle the crisis? The SMEs were mostly unprepared, with no crisis plans – the crisis was a shock to them. With no income and having to lay off staff, the financial and social consequences were large. As the companies were small, they recognised that alone, they had no impact on governmental decisions. They needed help from the trade associations to have influence at the political level, but also for sense-making processes, information-seeking, and problem-solving to make their business survive. If not before, the role and benefits of being part of a trade association became clear to the SMEs during the pandemic. Compared to theory, the SMEs were forced to apply an emergent approach, to improvise and to learn to be resilient. However, some were more resilient than others.

Next, what was the role of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden speaking on behalf of an industry and acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic? Our study shows that the roles, presence, and importance of the trade associations have not only changed to include new functions, but they have also been strongly intensified. They not only fulfilled their traditional role, but also had an important new role to play for the crisis problem-solving of their members and the industry during this long-term crisis. They were highly visible in the media and to the public, and they were able to make themselves heard at the political level. They were considered highly valuable actors and sources of information by journalists, politicians, and civil servants, as well as by their own members.

Furthermore, our study shows that the trade associations became central voices in the rhetorical arena of Covid-19. They communicated a lot compared with normal times, both internally and externally, and shifted for new digital technology when possible. The increase in media coverage was huge, the number of formal and informal meetings at the political level was important, and they even did campaigns to get the attention of the public and to show commitment to their members.

Most importantly, our study contributes to the development of theory by adding new insights into the under-researched area of extra-communication,

that is, communication between a trade association and its members during a crisis. The study has revealed new ways of communicating with members, including the role of psychologist. Furthermore, the study contributes to the rhetorical arena theory as it has identified new patterns of interaction and interdependencies among voices in the arena, including the voices of intermediaries.

As for practical implications, the study demonstrates that it will be fruitful to strengthen crisis preparedness and resilience among SMEs in the Scandinavian countries, and that SMEs can benefit from collaborating in a trade association or similar network. A crisis is a dangerous moment for a corporation but an opportunity for a trade association.

Concluding remarks

The Covid-19 pandemic makes visible the dynamics and interdependencies among the three subfields: public sector, political, and corporate crisis management. This crisis also demonstrates the importance of applying a multivocal approach to crisis communication in the rhetorical arena, anticipating and taking the multiple voices and their use of specific crisis communication strategies into account. Main challenges to the SMEs have been revealed, and we have gained special insights into the strengths and importance of the trade associations during the pandemic. The communication work of these associations is immense and complex, as they deal with internal, external, and extra-communication with staff, members, and external stakeholders, and having roles as personal counsellors, information providers, and media and public affairs managers. Interestingly, the insights that we have gained into the perceptions and work of chief communication officers in trade associations in the Scandinavian countries show that challenges and experiences in relation to their members and their roles seem to be the same. Hence, the idea of a specific Nordic model and its importance for the handling of a global crisis is supported.

However, it is important to emphasise that we have only conducted a very small and explorative study. To study similarities and differences more in depth within corporate crisis management between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, it would be interesting to expand the study to include more corporations, more industries, and more trade associations or meta-organisations within the three countries, not only from the perspective of industries that have been severely affected, but also from industries that have been affected less or have turned the crisis into an opportunity. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to also study the handling of the crisis from the perspectives of the individual member organisations in all three countries.

References

- Ahrne, G., & Brunsson, N. (2008). *Meta-organizations*. Edward Elgar.
- Barnett, M. L. (2013). One voice, but whose voice? Exploring what drives trade association activity. *Business & Society*, 52(2), 213–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650309350211>
- Benoit, W. L. (2015). *Accounts, excuses and apologies: Image repair theory and research* (2nd ed.). Suny Press.
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., & McConnell, A. (2009). Crisis exploitation: Political and policy impacts of framing contests. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(1), 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2017). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Breier, M., Kallmuenzer, A., Clauss, T., Gast, J., Kraus, S., & Tiberius, V. (2021). The role of business model innovation in the hospitality industry during the Covid-19 crisis. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 92, 102723. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102723>
- Brieghel, J. (2021, February 6). Kvickly donerer overskud fra nonfood-salg til små coronaklemte butikker [Kvickly donates surplus from nonfood-sales to small boutiques hit by corona]. SN. <https://www.sn.dk/albertslund-kommune/kvickly-donerer-overskud-fra-nonfood-salg-til-smaa-coronaklemte-butikker/>
- Britannica. (n.d.). Trade association. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/trade-association>
- Christensen, L. T. (2018). Autocommunication. In R. L. Heath, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of strategic communication* (pp. 68–73). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coombs, W. T. (2019). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Sage.
- Dansk Industri. (2020). Detailomsætningen er øget under corona-krisen [Retail turnover has increased during the corona crisis]. *DI Business*. <https://www.danskindustri.dk/di-business/arkiv/nyheder/2020/10/detailomsatningen-er-oget-under-coronakrisen/>
- Elmann, M. (2020, December 15). New management strategy required in corona crisis. *Management Newsletter*. Aarhus BSS. <https://mgmt.au.dk/about-us/news-and-events/newsitem/artikel/new-management-strategy-required-in-corona-crisis>
- Fink, S. (2000). *Crisis management: Planning for the Inevitable* (rev. ed.). Authors Guild. Backinprint.com. (Original work published 1986).
- Fløtten, T., & Trygstad, S. (Eds.) (2020). *Post-korona – en ny fase for den nordiske modellen?* [Post-corona – a new step of the Nordic model?] (Fafo-notat: 2020:11). Fafo.
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2011). The study of internal crisis communication: Towards an integrative framework. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(4), 347–361. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281111186977>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2015). Organizations, stakeholders, and intermediaries: Towards a general theory. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(4), 253–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2015.1064125>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). *Organizational crisis communication: A multivocal crisis communication*. Sage.
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2018). Voices in conflict: The crisis communication of meta-organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 32(1), 90–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318917705734>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2020a). Arenas and voices in organizational crisis communication: How far have we come? In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication: Handbook of communication science* (pp. 196–212). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2020b). Reframing the field: Public crisis management, political crisis management, and corporate crisis management. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication: Handbook of communication science* (pp. 59–102). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236>

- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2021, July 2–3). *Internal crisis communication during Covid-19: Challenging traditional understandings* [Conference presentation]. BledCom 2021, 28th International Public Relations Research Symposium, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.
- Hood, C. (2011). *The blame game: Spin, bureaucracy, and self-preservation in government*. Princeton University Press.
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Á. Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic* (pp. 184–198). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669-17>
- Jaques, T. (2014). *Issue management and crisis management: Exploring issues, crises, risk and reputation*. Oxford University Press.
- Jensen, J. D., Truelsen Elbæk, C., & Anand, R. (2021). Omstillingsparadokset: Afvejning imellem fleksibilitet og koordinering i arbejdsstyrken [The transition paradox: Balancing flexibility and coordination in the workforce]. *Økonomi & Politik*, 94(3). <https://doi.org/10.7146/okonomiogpolitik.v94i3.128820>
- Johansen, W., Van Gils, S., Kristensen, L.-B. K., Isaksson, M., Solvoll, M., Frandsen, F., & Bang, T. (2022). *Crisis preparedness of Norwegian companies, 2021* [in progress]. BI-Norwegian Business School.
- Jyllands-Posten. (2020, April 4). *Coronakrisen tvinger til rettidig omhu* [The corona crisis calls for due diligence]. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/leder/ECE12048702/coronakrisen-tvinger-til-rettidig-omhu/>
- Klyver, K., & Nielsen, S. L. (2021a). *Hvad kan SMV'er lære af Covid-19? En repræsentativ undersøgelse af yngre danske SMV'er* [Whan can SMEs learn from Covid-19? A representative investigation of younger Danish SMEs]. Department of Entrepreneurship & Relationship Management, University of Southern Denmark. https://www.sdu.dk/da/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ier_entrepenorskab_og_relationsledelse/forskning/forskningsprojekter/smv_covid19
- Klyver, K., & Nielsen, S. L. (2021b). Which crisis strategies are (expectedly) effective among SMEs during Covid-19? *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 16, e00273. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2021.e00273>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage.
- Lakoff, A. (2019). What is an epidemic emergency? In A. H. Kelly, F. Keck, & C. Lynteris (Eds.), *The anthropology of epidemics* (pp. 59–69). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429461897>
- Mitroff, I. I. (1994). Crisis management and environmentalism: A natural fit. *California Management Review*, 22(4), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41165747>
- Roux-Dufort, C., & Vidaillet, B. (2003). The difficulties of improvising in a crisis situation: A case study. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 33(1), 86–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.2003.11043675>
- Røed-Johansen, D., Johansen, P. A., Murray, S. M., Olsen, T., & Ringnes, T. (2020, December 9). SMS'ene viser hvordan regering åpnet grensene til Norge: Det skulle koste svært dyrt [The SMS show how the government opened the borders to Norway: It was going to have serious consequences]. *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/eKGgml/sms-er-hoeyt-politisk-spill-og-faglige-raad-som-ble-vraket-slik-aapnet>
- Schrøder, M. (2022). Researchers give crisis advice to SMEs. *Aarhus BSS Insights*. <https://bss.au.dk/en/aarhus-bss-nyheder/show/artikel/researchers-give-crisis-advice-to-smes>
- Seeger, M., Reynolds, B., & Day, A. (2020). Crisis and emergency risk communication: Past, present, and future. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication: Handbook of communication science* (pp. 401–418). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236>
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. (2010). Reflection in the shadow of blame: When do politicians appoint commissions of inquiry? *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 613–634. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000049>
- Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure and process*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199601936.001.0001>

- Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2020). Discourse of renewal: Understanding the theory's implications for the field of crisis communication. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis communication: Handbook of communication science* (pp. 165–176). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236>
- Warner, W. L., & Martin, D. (1967). Big trade and business associations. In W. L. Warner (Ed.), *The emergent American society* (Vol. 1) (pp. 314–446). Yale University Press.
- Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage
- Wildavsky, A. (1988). *Searching for safety*. Transaction Publishers.

Lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic

An analysis of communication frequency between interest organisations and political gatekeepers in Denmark and Sweden

Wiebke Marie Junk

Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

This chapter assesses how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the communication frequency between interest organisations and political gatekeepers in the media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy in Denmark and Sweden. Based on cross-national survey data, it analyses how lobbying access to these important arenas of policy debate has changed after the outbreak of Covid-19. While there is only minor variation between the political arenas and countries, three clear findings stand out: 1) access to policy debates remained relatively stable: for over 60 per cent of organisations, lobbying access did not change in the first months of the pandemic; 2) access after the outbreak of the pandemic is strongly related to pre-pandemic access, meaning it favours previous insiders; and 3) access still changed for a considerable share of organisations. Especially organisations that considered themselves more heavily affected by the crisis enjoyed more lobbying access during the pandemic than less-affected organisations.

Keywords: lobbying access, interest groups, pandemic politics, political advocacy, political voice

Introduction

Both in normal circumstances and in times of crisis, a considerable share of public and political communication is organised collectively by different types of interest organisations. Whether it is the Danish sector organisation HORESTA communicating on behalf of the hotel, restaurant, and tourism sector, or the Swedish nongovernmental organisation (NGO) Astma och Allergiförbundet, promoting the interests of people with airway diseases and allergies, organisations that advocate or lobby for different economic, social, or environmental interests play a key role in public and political communication.

The global Covid-19 pandemic is no exception, and it might have even increased the importance of interest organisations. In the face of massive uncertainties and an urgent need for information provision – both from public authorities to various social and economic groups, and from different stakeholders to political decision-makers – interest organisations had the potential to act as important “transmission belts” (Junk, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2014) in information exchange. They can, for instance, communicate the needs and concerns of particularly vulnerable groups – for example, restaurant owners, the elderly, or citizens with preexisting health conditions – to decision-makers. At the same time, interest organisations can help ensure that new, relevant policy information, for instance, on economic compensation, health and safety measures, or vaccines, reaches members of these groups.

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has put both decision-makers and interest organisations under extreme pressure: The outbreak of the virus, and policy responses to limit it from spreading, put many actors in a literal state of emergency. This might also have brought out “the ugly” sides of lobbying (Fraussen et al., 2020a–c), such as a (more) biased pattern of communication with, and access to, gatekeepers. It is conceivable, for instance, that more resourceful groups were able to continue communicating with political gatekeepers, or that political access was mainly granted to previous “insiders” that already enjoyed frequent interaction with political decision-makers before the pandemic. It is an important empirical question, how these potential roles of interest organisations have played out in Nordic countries.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate patterns of lobbying access in Denmark and Sweden both before and shortly after the outbreak of Covid-19. Three research questions are addressed:

- RQ1. To what extent did lobbying access to key arenas of public policy change after the outbreak of Covid-19?
- RQ2. Did previous “insiders” enjoy significantly more access during the Covid-19 crisis than other organisations?
- RQ3. Was more frequent access granted to organisations that were most affected by the Covid-19 crisis?

Notably, access is here defined as a situation where an interest organisation “has entered a political arena [...] passing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers” (Binderkrantz & Pedersen, 2017: 307). Specifically, in this chapter, I investigate access to the media, government, parliament, and the bureaucracy as important arenas of political debate. Put differently, access entails that an interest organisation interacts directly with political gatekeepers in these arenas, for instance, by contributing to a news story or meeting with a parliamentarian or member of government.

The focus on interest organisations here includes diverse types of organisations that become active in public policy and political debates. The literature on lobbying often works with a behavioural definition of interest organisations as organised non-state actors, which try to influence policy discussions (see Baroni et al., 2014; Junk, 2019; Klüver, 2013). The interest organisations studied here include business associations, trade unions, professional groups, and NGOs. Moreover, individual firms are included, since it is increasingly acknowledged that they engage in corporate lobbying themselves (Aizenberg & Hanegraaf, 2020a), rather than only using (sectoral) umbrella organisations, such as HORESTA, to get a voice in the political debate and decision-making.

The next sections explain the chapter’s focus on access across four arenas of political communication, as well as two strands of expectations about how access to these arenas might have been affected by the outbreak of the pandemic. My argument builds on already published work that explores changes in access patterns since the outbreak of Covid-19 in nine European countries and at the EU level (Junk et al., 2022). In this chapter, I add to this aggregate analysis by presenting patterns in Denmark and Sweden individually. First, I provide an overview of the quantitative survey data from Denmark and Sweden that is used throughout the chapter to shed light on access patterns during the pandemic. After initial descriptive findings, I present the results of multivariate analyses to gauge the drivers of access patterns during the pandemic. Finally, I conclude the chapter by summing up that lobbying access in Denmark and Sweden after the outbreak of Covid-19 has been characterised both by continuity – that is, a tendency to provide access to previous insiders – as well as change, in the form of an adaptation of access patterns to include the most affected organisations in policy debates.

Access to four arenas

Studying patterns in lobbying access is important from a communication perspective. As Milbrath (1960: 35) wrote, lobbying can essentially be seen as “a communication process” between groups and legislators. The more recent political science literature acknowledges this and typically theorises the interactions between interest organisations and political gatekeepers as information

exchanges (Binderkrantz, 2020; De Bruycker, 2016; Flöthe, 2019; Klüver, 2012), including the (strategic) framing of positions (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; De Bruycker, 2017; Junk & Rasmussen, 2019).

While an investigation of the specific frames – or the facts, arguments, and power (Milbrath, 1960) – in communication relationships is highly fruitful (see, e.g., Binderkrantz, 2020; Daviter, 2007; Ihlen et al., 2018; Junk & Rasmussen, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015), this chapter's focus lies on a necessary condition that comes before this: the *opportunity* to communicate with different decision-makers – that is, political access – after the outbreak of Covid-19.

Not least during a pandemic, the opportunity to share new information and suggest frames of different policy options can be pivotal. Decisions about vaccine plans, including the order and prioritisation of different groups in the population, for example, are likely to be affected by the types of interest groups that have the opportunity to provide information and affect the framing that dominates political debates.

Importantly, such debates and exchanges with lobbyists take place in multiple arenas at the same time. The literature on interest organisations and their lobbying practices typically distinguishes between inside and outside lobbying (e.g., Dür & Mateo, 2016; Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Junk, 2016; Kollman, 1998; Weiler & Brändli, 2015). Inside lobbying entails targeting – and perhaps reaching and influencing – policy-makers in various political institutions (see, e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Bouwen, 2004; Chalmers, 2013; De Bruycker, 2016; Dür et al., 2015; Klüver, 2011; Nelson & Yackee, 2012). Outside lobbying, on the other hand, is aimed at trying to impact media debates or public opinion, and thereby potentially (also) affecting policy-makers more indirectly (see Aizenberg & Müller, 2021; Beyers & De Bruycker, 2013; Binderkrantz, 2012; Binderkrantz et al., 2016; De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015; Junk & Rasmussen, 2019; Thrall, 2006).

When evaluating the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic with a focus on opportunities for communication between interest organisations and political gatekeepers, both inside and outside forms of lobbying access are important. The appearances of interest organisations in the media and their interactions with journalists (i.e., important gatekeepers in the outside arena) might, for instance, have been affected in different ways than lobbying interactions with parliamentarians, cabinet members, or bureaucrats (i.e., gatekeepers in inside arenas). Moreover, there might be differences in how the pandemic has affected consultation practices and information exchange in these *different* inside arenas, for instance, because of temporary suspensions of parliamentary work, or a centralisation of power in the hands of central governments. For these reasons, this chapter distinguishes between four arenas of lobbying access: media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy (Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Junk et al., 2022). In the next section, I revisit the chapter's research questions and

introduce expectations about how the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected access to these arenas.

Access after the outbreak of Covid-19: Research questions and two strands of expectations

Firstly, it is an important empirical question to ask what political access looked like after the outbreak of Covid-19 across these arenas and compared with pre-pandemic access (see RQ1). Given that the spread of Covid-19 exerted a massive, system-wide shock (Sabatier, 1998) which affected the information needs of policy-makers as well as the interests of social and economic groups, it is probable that patterns in lobbying access granted by gatekeepers to active interest organisations were affected by the pandemic. This is why the analysis first looks at whether and how much access to the four arenas of public policy changed after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Secondly, in addition to the descriptive expectation of *some* form of pandemic-driven change in access patterns, it is vital to assess potential drivers of access after the outbreak of the pandemic (see RQ2 & RQ3).

Existing theories of interest organisations offer quite contrasting accounts of the levels of bias in interest group systems, and might, therefore, lead to different expectations when it comes to how these systems react to an external shock (Sabatier, 1998) such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Broadly speaking, one can contrast a more pessimistic view with a more optimistic one of how lobbying access can be expected to be distributed after the outbreak of the pandemic.

From a pessimistic or cautionary perspective on lobbying (Olson, 1965; Schattschneider, 1960), we might expect that access after the outbreak of the pandemic is likely to have been biased, and to have prioritised and potentially further empowered “the usual suspects”. These usual suspects could here be interest organisations that already enjoyed high levels of access before the crisis, that is, previous insiders in all arenas. Reasons for this expectation can be structural inequalities (Schattschneider, 1960) and collective action problems (Olson, 1965), but also practical limitations. Especially in times of crisis, it might be difficult for political gatekeepers to adjust their patterns of consultation and interaction to include new voices: Even though the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in immense new policy problems, interacting with those actors that gatekeepers already know and trust might be a convenient fall-back option, and can ensure that effective consultation practices do not come to a halt. Put differently, this perspective would expect only limited changes in access after the external shock and would mainly predict that it further empowered organisations with previous ties to gatekeepers. Furthermore, an important factor in such a view on empowering the usual suspects can be resources, that is, capacities on the supply side of lobbying: Some organisations are better equipped to

lobby effectively, for instance, due to higher staff capacities (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2008). These resources should help them to respond more swiftly and effectively to the sudden external shock that the spread of Covid-19 exerted on political systems.

In contrast, a more optimistic take on interest group access after the outbreak of the pandemic would expect a higher level of responsiveness to the changes in policy problems and the underlying social and economic interests that were affected by the pandemic. Such a perspective goes hand-in-hand with pluralist theories of interest organisations (e.g., Truman, 1951), which expect that societal interests that are threatened or “disturbed” will organise and find a voice in the political process. Normatively, we can argue that it is desirable that the new social, economic, and political problems during the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a change in access patterns that prioritised giving voice to those organisations that represent more highly affected interests. Moreover, one can argue from the perspective of information exchange through lobbying that new information needs of gatekeepers during a crisis are arguably best met by organisations that are affected by it (Junk et al., 2022).

In the next section, I present the data used to address the chapter’s research questions, including testing these different expectations in Denmark and Sweden. While these two countries vary in their policy responses after the outbreak of the pandemic, no a priori expectations are formulated about whether or how access patterns vary *between* these countries. Instead, the data on the two cases are presented exploratively to assess potential similarities or differences between these two Nordic countries. Similarly, no explicit expectations are formulated regarding access to the different arenas (media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy), but in the empirical section, I carefully trace whether and how access patterns vary between them.

Data collection: Online surveys of interest organisations in Denmark and Sweden

The data for this chapter was collected as part of the international InterCov project (Interest Representation during the Coronavirus Crisis), which conducted its first wave of a cross-country survey of interest organisations in June–July 2020 to assess how the outbreak of Covid-19 had impacted lobbying practices in the first months of the pandemic. The survey was conducted in ten polities. In each of these, the survey was sent to stratified samples of the active interest group population to include approximately 150 organisations each in the following categories: 1) business organisations, 2) NGOs (i.e., public and ideational organisations), 3) professional organisations, 4) trade unions (limited by the number of existing unions in each country), as well as 5) large individual firms. To compile lists of the active interest group population, we relied on lobbying

registers as well as existing efforts by lobbying scholars (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020b; Crepaz & Hanegraaff, 2020; Binderkrantz et al., 2020; Naurin & Boräng, 2012; Pritoni, 2019) (for more information about the sampling and data collection, see Junk et al., 2022).

In this chapter, comparative results from the Danish and Swedish survey are presented. In addition, a series of focus group interviews were conducted in Denmark in early 2021, which also serve as background information for this chapter.

Response rates to the online survey in Denmark and Sweden lie at approximately 42 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively, which is high compared with the other countries and the typical response rates in surveys of interest organisations (Marchetti, 2015). In total, 529 organisations (304 in Denmark and 225 in Sweden) completed the survey to the end (for a discussion of non-response bias, refer to Junk et al., 2022).

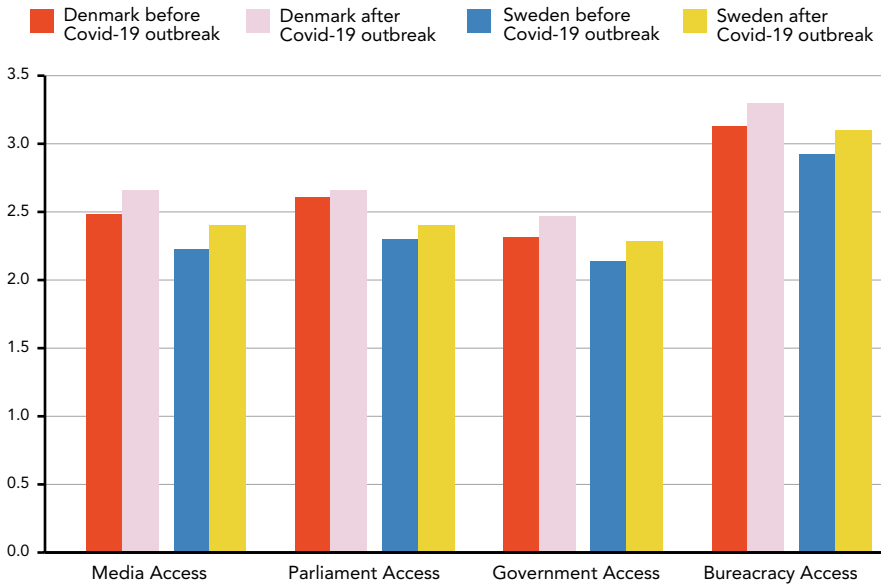
The main focus in this chapter lies on items in this survey that measured 1) the frequency of access to the four political arenas *after* the outbreak of the pandemic (March–June 2020), against the baseline of 2) the frequency of access *before* the outbreak of the pandemic. More specifically, the survey asked respondents to rate, on a five-point scale from “never” (1) to “almost on a daily basis” (5), how frequently their organisation had access to 1) media platforms, such as television, newspapers, and radio; 2) elected government officials at any level of government; 3) members of parliament; and 4) civil servants of government departments and agencies. This question was asked concerning the time before the Covid-19 pandemic and for the time during the pandemic (i.e., since March 2020) separately. These questions allow for comparing access before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, as well as assessing the effect of pre-crisis access (i.e., the effect of being a previous insider) (for the codebook including relevant questions, refer to Junk et al., 2020).

The next section provides descriptive evidence regarding these changes in access, before testing the expectations in multivariate regressions.

Descriptive findings: Stability and change in lobbying access

Figure 9.1 gives an initial overview of the mean rating of access in all four arenas in both Denmark and Sweden. A first (but too hasty) conclusion based on the comparison of means could be that access to the key arenas of political debate has changed little. In Denmark, for instance, the mean level of access to the media has changed from 2.5 (pre-pandemic) to 2.6 (post-outbreak) on a 1–5 scale. This corresponds to having access to the media between “Less than once a month (2)” and “Once a month (3)” for the average respondent – both before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Variation between arenas and countries is small.

Figure 9.1 Access before and after Covid-19 outbreak, by arena (mean rating of access frequency)



Comments: Figure 9.1 shows respondents' mean ratings of access in each arena in Denmark ($n \geq 329$) and Sweden ($n \geq 247$) before and after the outbreak of Covid-19 in Europe. Note that all analyses take all responses into account, including cases in which the survey was not completed to the end.

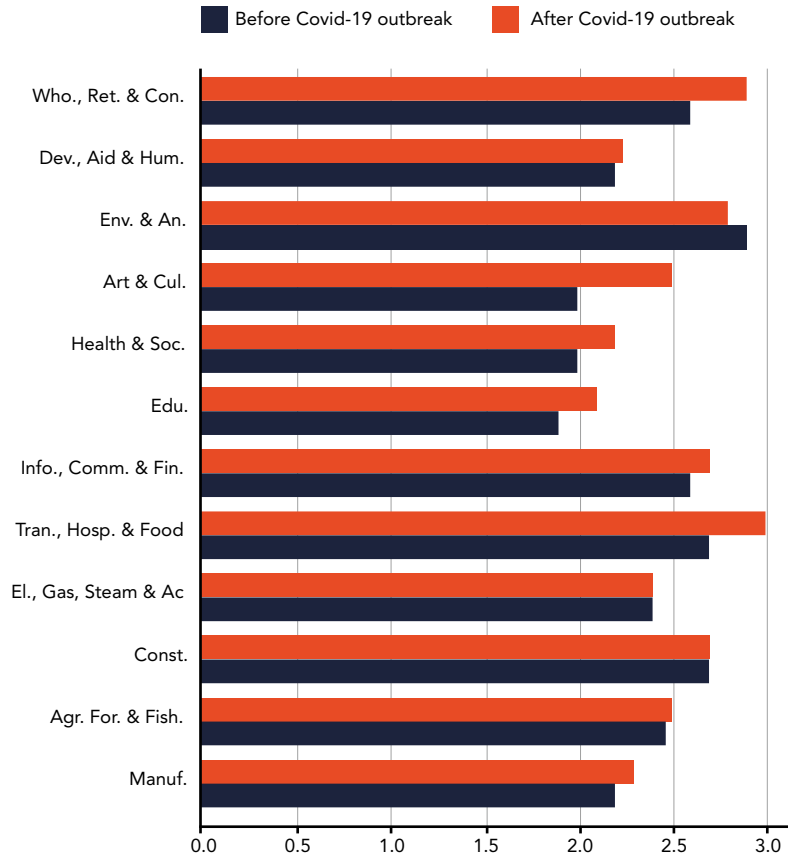
Source: Based on Junk et al., 2020

Still, it would be too hasty to conclude that the Covid-19 pandemic hardly affected lobbying access, because this only holds an average. What Figure 9.1 illustrates is that total access to the political arenas does not seem to have changed much. However, there is an important – and unanswered – question based on Figure 9.1: (How) has the *distribution* of lobbying access changed?

A first perspective on this can be to ask about distributive effects across sectors. Figure 9.2 gives a descriptive idea of variation between mean government access – before and after the outbreak of Covid-19 – in twelve broad sectors. These were categorised based on respondents' answers about which (economic or social) sector was the most relevant to their work. Figure 9.2 provides some nuance to the picture in Figure 9.1: While the average rating of government access in some sectors, such as “transportation and storage, hospitality, accommodation, and food service activities” increased more, it stayed relatively level or seems to have decreased slightly in others (such as “environment and animal rights”). Note, however, that this comparison must be taken cautiously, given that the number of observations varies greatly between sectors (between 8 and 115). Only few of the differences in mean post-outbreak access between sectors

are statistically significant. This holds, for instance, for the higher mean in post-outbreak access in the “transportation and storage, hospitality, accommodation, and food service activities” sector, compared with “agriculture, forestry, and fishing”, or “human health and social work activities”.

Figure 9.2 *Government access before and after Covid-19 outbreak, by sector (mean rating of access frequency)*



Comments: Figure 9.2 shows respondents’ mean ratings of government access in different sectors in Denmark and Sweden (pooled sample; $n = 427$) before and after the outbreak of Covid-19. Read sector abbreviations as follows: Agr. For. & Fish. = agriculture, forestry, and fishing; Manuf. = manufacturing; El., Gas, Steam & Ac. = electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply, water, and mining; Const. = construction; Tran., Hosp. & Food = transportation and storage, hospitality, accommodation, and food service activities; Info., Comm. & Fin. = information and communication, financial and insurance activities, and real estate activities; Edu. = education; Health & Soc. = human health and social work activities; Art & Cul. = arts, entertainment, culture, sport, and leisure; Env. & An. = environment and animal rights; Dev., Aid & Hum. = development, aid, and human rights; Who., Ret. & Con. = wholesale, retail, trade, and consumers.

Source: Based on Junk et al., 2020

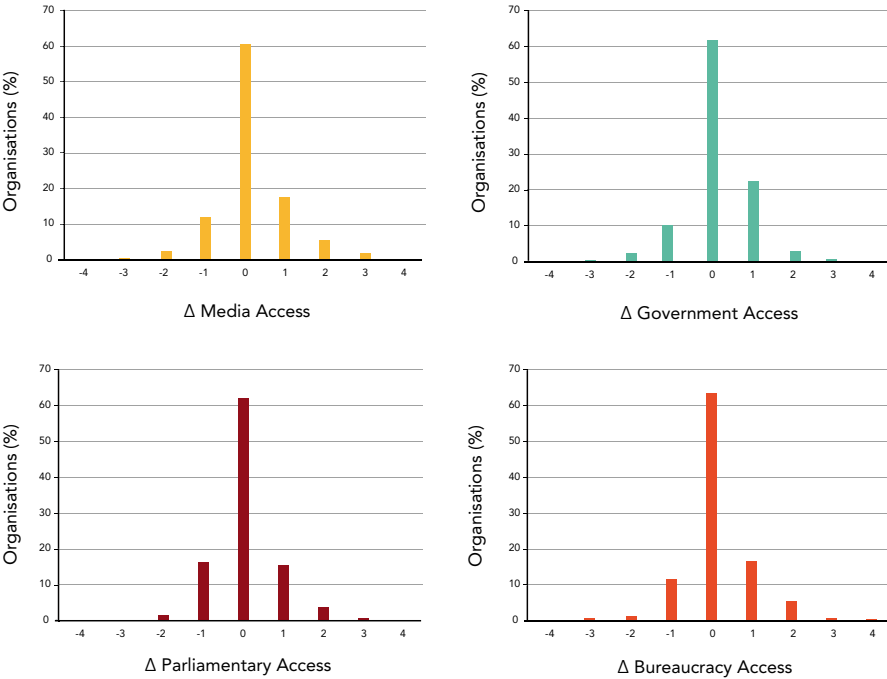
Tentatively, these patterns suggest that organisations in some sectors have been better than others at securing governmental access early in the pandemic. At the same time, the categorisation into sectors is relatively broad. Another valuable, and more comparable, level of analysis is that of individual interest organisations. The two data points on access (before and after the outbreak of Covid-19) allow the assessment of whether access has increased or decreased after the outbreak of Covid-19 for each organisation that has taken the survey. To do so, a measure of the change in access (Δ) is created per respondent per arena (media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy) by taking the difference between the frequency of access before the crisis and the frequency of access during the crisis for the particular respondent and arena. These variables take positive values if access has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic relative to the access before the crisis, and negative values in the opposite scenario. A value of zero indicates no change in access before and after the crisis. Figures 9.3 and 9.4 show the distribution of this organisation-level measure of the change in access in both Denmark (see Figure 9.3) and Sweden (see Figure 9.4).

Several important conclusions follow from these figures. First, there is a stable core of access in both countries: Approximately 60–65 per cent of the organisations in both countries and all four arenas have enjoyed the same level of access in the first months after the outbreak of the pandemic as they did before the crisis ($\Delta = 0$). This attests to the ability of gatekeepers and interest organisations to continue interacting and exchanging information, despite the extremely difficult conditions. Some might argue that this could be an effect of strong corporatist traditions in Sweden and Denmark (Jahn, 2016) that institutionalise and lock-in patterns of interaction between interest organisations and political gatekeepers. Notably, however, the InterCov project also analysed changes in access patterns in eight other polities including Italy, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, and found similar patterns in changes in access, including a stable core of organisations for which access remained unchanged (Junk et al., 2022).

A second important insight from Figures 9.3 and 9.4 is that a considerable share of organisations has increased their access ($\Delta > 0$). The share of organisations to which this applies varies somewhat between arenas but amounts to approximately 20–25 per cent of surveyed organisations that increased their access after the outbreak of Covid-19. Third, the flipside of this pattern is that another set of organisations has decreased ($\Delta < 0$) their access relative to the time before the pandemic. This applies to approximately 13–18 per cent of surveyed organisations. These patterns show that the pandemic has created both access “winners” and “losers”, that is, there are distributional consequences when it comes to who has more voice in political debates. Fourth, we see some variation between the arenas: While there is a higher share of access “winners” in the media, government, and bureaucracy arenas (in both Denmark and Sweden),

there is a higher share of organisations that had decreased access to the parliamentary arena. This might indicate that, especially in the first months of the pandemic, parliaments lost importance from a lobbying perspective, whereas the information industry (media), the executive (government), and the administration (bureaucracy) increased their interactions with interest organisations.

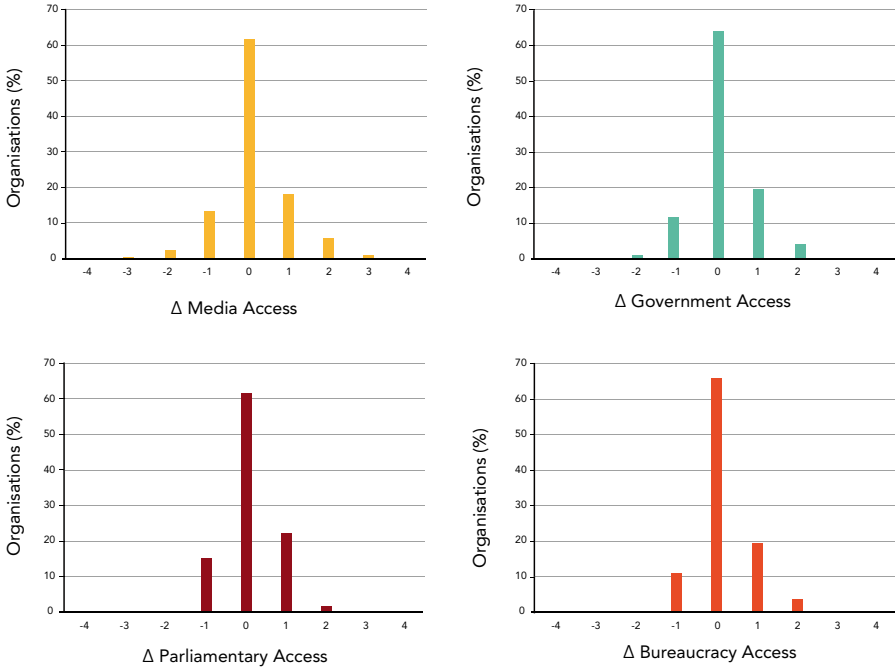
Figure 9.3 *Share of Danish organisations that experienced changes in access (per cent)*



Comments: Figure 9.3 shows the share of respondent organisations that experienced changes in access across four arenas in Denmark ($n \geq 328$).

Source: Based on Junk et al., 2020

Figure 9.4 Share of Swedish organisations that experienced changes in access (per cent)



Comments: Figure 9.4 shows the share of respondent organisations that experienced changes in access across four arenas in Sweden ($n \geq 246$).

Source: Based on Junk et al., 2020

Based on these descriptive findings, it is important to ask the following questions: What drives these changes in access? Are the usual suspects (previous insiders and more resourceful organisations) the ones who enjoyed higher access after the outbreak of the pandemic (RQ2)? Or did access during the pandemic prioritise more highly affected and vulnerable groups (RQ3)? The next section presents the results of multivariate regressions to address these questions.

Analysis: Drivers of access after the outbreak of Covid-19

To test the extent to which there is support for different expectations about lobbying access after the outbreak of Covid-19, Table 9.1 presents the results of multivariate ordinal regressions. The dependent variable is the respondent's rating of the frequency of access to the respective arena after the outbreak of the pandemic. As independent variables, the models include 1) the pre-pandemic level of access to the specific arena, 2) the level of staff resources of the organi-

sation, and 3) the rating of the organisation's level of affectedness by the crisis. The level of pre-pandemic access here taps into the effect of being a previous insider. It also means that the analysis effectively teases out drivers of changes in access after the outbreak of the pandemic, given it controls for pre-pandemic access. Staff resources allow addressing the more pessimistic expectation with a focus on whether resources drive increases and decreases in access during the Covid-19 crisis. To operationalise these resources, respondents were asked to place their organisation in one of five categories, based on how many full-time staff members "focus on political work, such as advocacy or public relations". For the analysis, answers are grouped into three categories: low (< 1), medium (1–4) and high (≥ 5) lobbying staff resources. To assess evidence for the second expectation regarding the organisation's level of affectedness, we use data from a survey question that asked respondents to rate the extent to which their interests were "more or less affected by the Coronavirus crisis, compared to other stakeholders in [country]". This was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (much less affected) to 5 (much more affected).

In addition, the models in Table 9.1 control for the organisation type in three categories: 1) business organisations, including business associations and firms; 2) profession groups, including professional associations and labour unions; and 3) NGOs, including public interest groups, cause-centred groups, and citizen associations. As another relevant control, the models include the organisation's age in three intervals (< 21 years; 21–50 years; > 50 years), as this might affect existing relationships with gatekeepers, as well as other variables, such as resources. Finally, the models include clustered standard errors by sector.

Table 9.1 runs models in the Danish and Swedish samples separately, one for each lobbying arena, respectively. This allows for teasing out potential differences between both the countries and arenas.

The results displayed in Table 9.1 provide support for both the optimistic and more cautionary accounts of lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic. We see clearly across all four arenas and both countries that pre-pandemic access is a strong predictor of post-outbreak access ($p < 0.001$). This, on its own, does not necessarily have to be bad news, however. It can also indicate that there was a level of stability in the interaction of gatekeepers with interest organisations. Very interesting is to see what other factors explain post-outbreak access, when controlling for previous access.

Table 9.1 *The frequency of access after the outbreak of Covid-19*

		Media		Government		Parliament		Bureaucracy	
		(1) DK	(2) SE	(3) DK	(4) SE	(5) DK	(6) SE	(7) DK	(8) SE
Pre-pandemic access (arena-specific)		2.03*** (0.21)	1.96*** (0.21)	2.37*** (0.33)	2.90*** (0.39)	2.29*** (0.27)	3.03*** (0.27)	2.43*** (0.27)	2.43*** (0.27)
Staff resources (baseline: low)	<i>medium</i>	0.75*** (0.18)	0.43* (0.18)	0.94*** (0.26)	0.29 (0.37)	1.10*** (0.32)	0.26 (0.50)	0.31 (0.21)	0.40 (0.25)
	<i>high</i>	0.71** (0.27)	1.66*** (0.39)	1.36*** (0.28)	0.32 (0.56)	0.82* (0.38)	0.40 (0.74)	0.24 (0.41)	0.14 (0.47)
Affectedness by the crisis		0.87*** (0.15)	0.65*** (0.11)	0.75*** (0.12)	0.55*** (0.14)	0.80*** (0.12)	0.53** (0.20)	0.71*** (0.13)	0.37** (0.12)
Type of organisation (baseline: NGOs)	<i>business & firms</i>	0.15 (0.19)	-0.33 (0.53)	0.22 (0.28)	0.23 (0.53)	0.44 (0.29)	0.63 (0.46)	0.75* (0.34)	-0.38 (0.38)
	<i>profession & labour</i>	0.09 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.45)	0.44 (0.38)	0.50 (0.35)	0.17 (0.35)	1.28*** (0.33)	0.61*** (0.18)	0.34 (0.28)
Age of organisation (baseline < 21 years)	<i>21–50 years</i>	0.27 (0.45)	-0.34 (0.63)	0.16 (0.33)	0.15 (0.34)	-0.32 (0.42)	0.56 (0.43)	-0.13 (0.39)	0.65* (0.31)
	<i>>50 years</i>	0.18 (0.23)	0.24 (0.28)	0.35 (0.22)	0.10 (0.28)	0.44 (0.37)	0.18 (0.37)	0.53* (0.27)	0.55+ (0.29)
Number of organisations		290	208	289	207	289	206	290	208

Comments: Table 9.1 shows a series of ordered logistic regressions. The respective dependent variable is the frequency of access – 1 (never) to 5 (almost on a daily basis) – to one of the four political arenas: media (models 1 & 2), government (models 3 & 4), parliament (models 5 & 6), and bureaucracy (models 7 & 8) in Denmark (DK; models 1, 3, 5, 7) and Sweden (SE; models 2, 4, 6, 8). All models include clustered standard errors for sector. Reporting on cuts omitted to limit table length. *N* is reduced somewhat due to missing values (skipped questions).

* $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Based on Junk et al., 2020

Firstly, when it comes to media access in Denmark and Sweden, as well as government and parliamentary access in Denmark, we see that organisations with medium or high staff resources enjoyed more access after the outbreak of Covid-19 ($p < 0.05$). This advantage for more resourceful organisations, however, cannot be traced when it comes to access to the Swedish government, parliament, and bureaucracy. Still, these (partial) access advantages for more resourceful organisations are potentially worrying. If access to political debates during a crisis is strongly affected by staff capacities, this can introduce biases at the expense of smaller, less resourceful organisations, for instance, those mainly relying on volunteers. As an illustrative example, in interviews conducted with Danish interest organisations in the human health and social

work sector, several of them named concerns about the effects of Covid-19 on volunteers in the organisation. Inequalities in the size and type of staff capacity of interest organisations – and their effects on access and political voice – are an important factor to keep in mind, perhaps especially in crisis situations, where the failure to consult some groups due to limited staff capacities can have far-reaching consequences.

Judging from both the anecdotal evidence in the interviews and the results in Table 9.1, however, there is also reason for optimism. Many of the health-focused groups I interviewed experienced high levels of access to the media, government ministers, and health authorities due to a high interest in their input on Covid-19–related questions. In this way, these organisations were able to voice the concerns of their members, who were typically highly affected by the pandemic, for instance, as patients with different types of preexisting illnesses. Their anecdotes fit well with the next finding seen in Table 9.1: Higher affectedness by the crisis is a strong predictor of access during the pandemic. This holds in all four arenas and both in Denmark and Sweden ($p < 0.01$). This attests to the ability of interest organisations and gatekeepers to adjust their interactions based on the new policy problems and information needs during the pandemic. Rather than only giving access to previous insiders and resourceful organisations, all arenas increased access to highly affected organisations.

Moving on to the controls, there is limited evidence that – all else equal and controlling for access patterns before the pandemic – economic organisations enjoyed higher access during the pandemic than NGOs. Only when it comes to access to the Swedish parliament and the Danish bureaucracy do we see a significant access advantage for profession and labour organisations ($p < 0.001$). Businesses and firms only enjoyed significantly higher access than NGOs to the Danish bureaucracy ($p < 0.05$). In this sense, the pandemic seems to have only mildly increased potential business biases in access, compared with pre-pandemic access. Regarding organisation age, it seems there are hardly any advantages for older organisations, except when it comes to access to the Swedish bureaucracy ($p < 0.1$).

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have assessed communication during the Covid-19 pandemic based on the frequency of interactions between interest organisations and political gatekeepers in the media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy. My empirical material relied on a large survey of over 500 interest organisations in Sweden and Denmark and allowed comparing patterns of lobbying access before and after the pandemic's outbreak. This material – complemented by qualitative interviews – was used to address three research questions on the

extent to which access to key arenas of public policy changed after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as on potential drivers of those changes.

The results of descriptive and multivariate analyses clearly attest to both continuity and change in access patterns to public and political debates during the crisis. On the one hand, access to important arenas of public policy has remained unchanged for over 60 per cent of surveyed organisations, indicating that Danish and Swedish interest group systems demonstrated a high level of stability. Put differently, previous insiders were more likely to enjoy higher levels of access in the first months after the outbreak of the pandemic.

On the other hand, we see that, when holding pre-pandemic access constant, there is strong evidence that a higher level of affectedness by the crisis had a significant positive effect on the frequency of access to all lobbying arenas (media, government, parliament, and bureaucracy) in both Denmark and Sweden. In this sense, lobbying access in these two Nordic countries under study can be seen as an instance of exchanges between interest organisations and different political gatekeepers that are *adaptive* to the changed circumstances during the crisis.

Other than this, there is some evidence that organisations with higher staff resources increased their access during the pandemic. This holds for media, government, and parliament access in Denmark, and for media access in Sweden. There is limited evidence that some types of organisations enjoyed higher access increases than others. Both Danish labour and professional organisations, as well as business organisations and firms, for instance, enjoyed higher access to the Danish bureaucracy after the outbreak of Covid-19, compared with NGOs, when controlling for pre-pandemic access. This indicates that the crisis has partly increased inequalities in access between different group types against the baseline of pre-pandemic access. This conclusion is in line with other analyses of changes in lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic, including to the European Commission, where a business dominance in Covid-19-focused meetings has been attested, although the differences between group types are not stark (Rasmussen, 2020).

The quantitative analyses presented in this chapter are insightful to gauge potential biases in consultation practices and the opportunities for organisations to voice the interests of (more or less affected) members for stakeholders in Scandinavian countries. At the same time, however, there are several aspects of crisis access and communication they overlook. Importantly, the frequency of access says little about the *content* of information exchanges. It might have been one thing to secure access to Covid-19-related policy discussions, while, according to the qualitative interviews I conducted in Denmark, it has been difficult to place (or keep) non-Covid-19-related issues on the agenda of political gatekeepers. Moreover, the data presented here focused only on the first months of the pandemic (March–June 2020), that is, the short-term effects of this massive crisis on lobbying access. Future research could assess whether the access

advantages for more affected organisations continued throughout the pandemic, or whether different types of actors enjoyed access advantages during different phases of the crisis (see Crepaz et al., 2022a: Chapter 5). Finally, access does not necessarily entail influence. In the future, it is important to evaluate which groups were most successful in attaining their policy preferences (see Crepaz et al., 2022a: Chapter 6), negotiating favourable health and safety measures for their sectors, or securing larger economic rescue packages (see also Crepaz et al., 2022). Both groups' opportunities to communicate (political access) and the content of communication (e.g., arguments and frames) are likely to be pivotal for understanding such influence.

References

- Aizenberg, E., & Hanegraaff, M. (2020a). Is politics under increasing corporate sway? A longitudinal study on the drivers of corporate access. *West European Politics*, 43(1), 181–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1603849>
- Aizenberg, E., & Hanegraaff, M. (2020b). Time is of the essence: A longitudinal study on business presence in political news in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(2), 281–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219882814>
- Aizenberg, E., & Müller, M. (2021). Signaling expertise through the media? Measuring the appearance of corporations in political news through a complexity lens. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(11), 1770–1788. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1797144>
- Baroni, L., Carroll, B. J., Chalmers, A. W., Marquez, L. M. M., & Rasmussen, A. (2014). Defining and classifying interest groups. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 3(2), 141–159. <https://doi.org/10.1057/iga.2014.9>
- Baumgartner, F. R., Berry, J. M., Hojnacki, M., Kimball, D. C., & Leech, B. L. (2009). *Lobbying and policy change: Who wins, who loses, and why*. University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, F. R., & Mahoney, C. (2008). Forum section: The two faces of framing: Individual-level framing and collective issue definition in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, 9(3), 435–449. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116508093492>
- Beyers, J., & De Bruycker, I. (2013). Who wins media space and why? Interest groups and legislative lobbying in the European news media. *Proceedings from the 7th ECPR General Conference, Sciences Po, Bordeaux, France*.
- Binderkrantz, A. S. (2012). Interest groups in the media: Bias and diversity over time. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 117–139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2011.01997.x>
- Binderkrantz, A. S. (2020). Interest group framing in Denmark and the UK: Membership representation or public appeal? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(4), 569–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1599041>
- Binderkrantz, A. S., Bonafont, L. C., & Halpin, D. R. (2016). Diversity in the news? A study of interest groups in the media in the UK, Spain and Denmark. *British Journal of Political Science*, 47(2), 313–328. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000599>
- Binderkrantz, A. S., Christiansen, P. M., & Pedersen, H. H. (2014). A privileged position? The influence of business interests in government consultations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24(4), 879–896. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu028>
- Binderkrantz, A. S., Christiansen, P. M., & Pedersen, H. H. (2015). Interest group access to the bureaucracy, parliament, and the media. *Governance*, 28(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12089>
- Binderkrantz, A. S., Christiansen, P. M., & Pedersen, H. H. (2020). Mapping interest group access to politics: A presentation of the INTERARENA research project. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 9(3), 290–301. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-020-00095-9>

- Binderkrantz, A. S., & Pedersen, H. H. (2017). What is access? A discussion of the definition and measurement of interest group access. *European Political Science*, 16(306), 306–321. <https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2016.17>
- Bouwen, P. (2004). Exchanging access goods for access: A comparative study of business lobbying in the European Union institutions. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(3), 337–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2004.00157.x>
- Chalmers, A. W. (2013). Trading information for access: Informational lobbying strategies and interest group access to the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(1), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2012.693411>
- Crepaz, M., & Hanegraaff, M. (2020). The funding of interest groups in the EU: Are the rich getting richer? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(1), 102–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1567572>
- Crepaz, M., Junk, W. M., Hanegraaff, M., & Berkhout, J. (2022a). *Viral lobbying: Strategies, access and influence during the Covid-19 pandemic*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110783148>
- Crepaz, M., Hanegraaff, M., & Junk, W. M. (2022b). Is there a first mover advantage in lobbying? A comparative analysis of how the timing of lobbying affects the influence of interest groups in 10 polities. *Comparative Political Studies*. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221109441>
- Daviter, F. (2007). Policy framing in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 14(4), 654–666. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760701314474>
- De Bruycker, I. (2016). Pressure and expertise: Explaining the information supply of interest groups in EU legislative lobbying. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(3), 599–616. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12298>
- De Bruycker, I. (2017). Framing and advocacy: A research agenda for interest group studies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(5), 775–787. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1149208>
- De Bruycker, I., & Beyers, J. (2015). Balanced or biased? Interest groups and legislative lobbying in the European news media. *Political Communication*, 32(3), 453–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.958259>
- Dür, A., Bernhagen, P., & Marshall, D. (2015). Interest group success in the European Union: When (and why) does business lose? *Comparative Political Studies*, 48(8), 951–983. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014565890>
- Dür, A., & Mateo, G. (2016). *Insiders versus outsiders: Interest group politics in multilevel Europe*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785651.001.0001>
- Flöthe, L. (2019). Technocratic or democratic interest representation? How different types of information affect lobbying success. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 8, 165–183. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-019-00051-2>
- Fraussen, B., Albareda, A., Braun, C., Muller, M., & Sullivan, E. (2020a, June 24). Blog part I: Lobbying in times of (corona)-crisis: The good, the bad and the ugly. *Leiden University News*. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2020/06/lobbying-in-times-of-corona-crisis-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-i>
- Fraussen, B., Albareda, A., Braun, C., Muller, M., & Sullivan, E. (2020b, June 24). Blog part II: Lobbying in times of (corona)-crisis: The good, the bad and the ugly. *Leiden University News*. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2020/06/lobbying-in-times-of-corona-crisis-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-ii>
- Fraussen, B., Albareda, A., Braun, C., Muller, M., & Sullivan, E. (2020c, June 24). Blog part III: Lobbying in times of (corona)-crisis: The good, the bad and the ugly. *Leiden University News*. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2020/06/lobbying-in-times-of-corona-crisis-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-iii>
- Hanegraaff, M., Beyers, J., & De Bruycker, I. (2016). Balancing inside and outside lobbying: The political strategies of lobbyists at global diplomatic conferences. *European Journal of Political Research*, 55(3), 568–588. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12145>
- Ihlen, Ø., Raknes, K., Somerville, I., Valentini, C., Stachel, C., Lock, I., Davidson, S., & Seele, P.

- (2018). Framing “the public interest”: Comparing public lobbying campaigns in four European states. *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, 2(1). <http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-68192>
- Jahn, D. (2016). Changing of the guard: Trends in corporatist arrangements in 42 highly industrialized societies from 1960 to 2010. *Socio-Economic Review*, 14(1), 47–71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwu028>
- Junk, W. M. (2016). Two logics of NGO advocacy: Understanding inside and outside lobbying on EU environmental policies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(2), 236–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1041416>
- Junk, W. M. (2019). Representation beyond people: Lobbying access of umbrella associations to legislatures and the media. *Governance*, 32(2), 313–330. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12375>
- Junk, W. M., Crepaz, M., Hanegraaff, M., Berkhout, J., & Aizenberg, E. (2020). *InterCov project: Online survey on interest representation during Covid-19* [Survey text and codebook] (Edition: June–July 2020). https://www.wiebkejunk.com/_files/ugd/9a0cb4_eb572405723f490f8fd6e464420f3a33.pdf
- Junk, W. M., Crepaz, M., Hanegraaff, M., Berkhout, J., & Aizenberg, E. (2022). Changes in interest group access in times of crisis: No pain, no (lobby) gain. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(9), 1374–1394. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1968936>
- Junk, W. M., & Rasmussen, A. (2019). Framing by the flock: Collective issue definition and advocacy success. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(4), 483–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018784044>
- Klüver, H. (2011). The contextual nature of lobbying: Explaining lobbying success in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, 12(4), 483–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116511413163>
- Klüver, H. (2012). Informational lobbying in the European Union: The effect of organisational characteristics. *West European Politics*, 35(3), 491–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2012.665737>
- Klüver, H. (2013). *Lobbying in the European Union: Interest groups, lobbying coalitions, and policy change*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199657445.001.0001>
- Kollman, K. (1998). *Outside lobbying: Public opinion and interest group strategies*. Princeton University Press.
- Mahoney, C. (2008). *Brussels versus the beltway: Advocacy in the United States and the European Union*. Georgetown University Press.
- Marchetti, K. (2015). The use of surveys in interest group research. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 4(3), 272–282. <https://doi.org/10.1057/iga.2015.1>
- McEntire, K. J., Leiby, M., & Krain, M. (2015). Human rights organizations as agents of change: An experimental examination of framing and micromobilization. *American Political Science Review*, 109(3), 407–426. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000295>
- Milbrath, L. W. (1960). Lobbying as a communication process. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24(1), 32–53. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266928>
- Naurin, D., & Boräng, F. (2012). Who are the lobbyists? A population study of interest groups in Sweden. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 114(1), 95–102. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/8396>
- Nelson, D., & Yackee, S.W. (2012). Lobbying coalitions and government policy change: An analysis of federal agency rulemaking. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(2), 339–353. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611001599>
- Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action*. Harvard University Press.
- Pritoni, A. (2019). Preferring Rome to Brussels: Mapping interest group Europeanisation in Italy. *South European Society and Politics*, 24(4), 441–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2020.1728958>
- Rasmussen, A. (2020, June 17). How has Covid-19 changed lobbying activity across Europe? *LSE Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euorpblog/2020/06/17/how-has-covid-19-changed-lobbying-activity-across-europe/>
- Rasmussen, A., Carroll, B. J., & Lowery, D. (2014). Representatives of the public? Public opinion and interest group activity. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(2), 250–268.

- <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12036>
- Sabatier, P. A. (1998). The advocacy coalition framework: Revisions and relevance for Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 5(1), 98–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501768880000051>
- Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Thrall, T. A. (2006). The myth of the outside strategy: Mass media news coverage of interest groups. *Political Communication*, 23(4), 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600600976989>
- Truman, D. B. (1951). *The governmental process: Political interests and public opinion*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Weiler, F., & Brändli, M. (2015). Inside versus outside lobbying: How the institutional framework shapes the lobbying behaviour of interest groups. *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(4), 745–766. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12106>

Section III

Watchdogs and government megaphones

The dual democratic roles of the news media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Iceland and Sweden

Marina Ghersetti,^I Jón Gunnar Ólafsson,^{II}
& Sigrún Ólafsdóttir^{III}

^I Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

^{II} Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland

^{III} Faculty of Sociology, University of Iceland

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights two democratic roles of the news media during a crisis: to provide important information and to be a critical voice of decisions made by those in power. In this chapter, we examine how the media in Iceland and Sweden conveyed authorities' messages and to what extent the authorities' actions were questioned. The study is based on content analysis of news reports collected during the first year of the pandemic (2020). Our findings show that reporting largely followed an informative discourse and that health and economy were the dominant themes. Authorities in both countries relied heavily on experts to convey information, which was reflected in the news coverage. Critical reporting on the implemented strategies and protective measures was limited, more so in Iceland than in Sweden, but the consequences of the pandemic were clearly more dire in the latter context. Discourses in both countries were more national than international, with only few references made to other countries, including Nordic neighbours.

Keywords: crisis communication, media coverage of Covid-19, democratic roles of the news media, news reporting, content analysis

Ghersetti, M., Ólafsson, J. G., & Ólafsdóttir, S. (2023). Watchdogs and government megaphones: The dual democratic roles of the news media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Iceland and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 217–240). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-10>

Introduction

A cornerstone of crisis communication is to deliver compelling and coherent messages to affected citizens about what is at stake, the causes of the crisis, and what actions should be taken (Boin et al., 2016; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1). In the first phases of an emergency, the need for authorities to communicate coincides with news media logic that prioritises unexpected and sensational events with negative elements and high public interest, and hence crises tend to receive intense media coverage early on (Houston et al., 2018). But the communicative model of crisis management may eventually contrast with the democratic roles of the media in society – to describe and explain events from more than one perspective by giving voices to opposing opinions or through investigative journalism (Asp, 2007; Curran, 2002). During societal crises, the media is expected to convey important information to the public from government and expert agencies, but not simply disseminate this information without critically examining it. Journalism should also provide citizens with relevant knowledge that enables them to hold the responsible politicians and authorities to account. Finally, when a particular crisis ends, or at least is under control, people need information to help them process what has happened, to recover, and return to normal conditions (Odén et al., 2016). The news media thus has a fundamental role in society's crisis communication: in the short term, to mitigate humanitarian and economic consequences of the crisis at hand and keep responsible authorities accountable; and in the long term, to contribute to society's resilience and capacity to withstand new and unexpected disruptions (Boin et al., 2016).

Iceland and Sweden represent a particularly interesting comparison concerning crisis management and Covid-19 restrictions, as the two countries took different approaches than their Nordic counterparts (and most other Western countries). Both states relied heavily on public health authorities, and politicians largely followed their recommendations. The key difference between the two states is that the minister of health had the final say in Iceland (Ólafsson, 2021b), whereas the lack of a specific law on crisis management outside of wartime in Sweden hindered the government from imposing harsh restrictions (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). The two countries never went as far in restrictions as most other Western states, with Iceland following partial restrictions (e.g., a ban on large gatherings, but never a complete lockdown) and Sweden relying mainly on recommendations. Despite these similarities, the outcomes in the two countries varied drastically. By October 2021, the number of infected persons per million inhabitants in Sweden was more than three times higher than in Iceland, and the number of Covid-19-related deaths was 15 times higher (Worldometers, 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1).

In this chapter, we seek to compare and evaluate how the Icelandic and Swedish news media fulfilled their informative and investigative roles during the

first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020), when both countries experienced two severe waves of infections. Building on data collection from two research projects – one in Iceland and the other in Sweden – not harmonised from the beginning, we acknowledge that the data is not completely comparable. Yet, to our knowledge, this is the only data available to provide insights into the news coverage in the two countries, and we have used measures that are largely comparable. However, it is important to keep in mind that, in some cases, it is not possible to provide direct comparisons. Yet, we argue that our analysis provides us with important, albeit cautious, insights into the discourse in the two contexts. Consequently, we view our analysis as a first step toward a comparative research agenda on media discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordics, and we argue that the insights we provide can offer important information on how to design and implement studies that are coordinated across contexts from the beginning. In this chapter, we address the following research questions:

- RQ1. How much attention did the Icelandic and Swedish news media give to the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020?
- RQ2. What defined the content of Covid-19 coverage in the Icelandic and Swedish news media, in terms of main actors, themes, and countries covered?
- RQ3. To what extent did the Icelandic and Swedish Covid-19 news reporting contain criticism?

Our focus on the amount of news coverage, themes, and countries provides an understanding of the informative role of the news media during the period under study, whilst the emphasis on actors and criticism illustrates the investigative role of the news media. While the media landscape in the two countries is largely similar – both in terms of roles and functions (Therrien, 2018) – the developments and outcomes of the pandemic varied drastically. Consequently, we would expect the media discourse in the two countries to differ.

Using secondary data, we focus on and compare how the Icelandic and Swedish news media framed the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it was handled. The comparison is based on a selection of key variables. First, the news value of the events is compared by mapping the amount of reporting: Did the media in Iceland and Sweden pay the same amount of attention to the pandemic during the same time periods in 2020? Second, we identify the actors that were given a voice in the media most often, and through that, given the opportunity to frame the portrayal of the pandemic. Third, we evaluate which themes dominated the discourse in the two countries and the extent to which the coverage was similar or different. After that, the degree of criticism in the reporting is compared:

Given the different outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic between the two countries in 2020, was the Swedish media discourse more critical than the Icelandic? Finally, whether the domestic situation was put into perspective by news reports from other countries is compared: To what extent did the Icelandic and Swedish news media report on pandemic mitigation in other countries, specifically their Nordic neighbours, where severer restrictions were imposed and – compared with Sweden – with considerably milder consequences? This study also extends the comparison of media content to late 2020, thus including a longer period than previous Nordic studies on media reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic (cf. Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Hansson et al., 2021). By comparing the discourse in this way, we are able to provide an evaluation of how the media in Iceland and Sweden fulfilled their informative and investigative roles. Specifically, the coding of themes and the reliance on public authorities indicate provision of information, whereas the coding of how many different voices and criticism appeared give insights into the investigative roles.

The democratic roles of the news media during crisis

The news media in democratic societies have two fundamental roles. One is to provide citizens with information on public affairs issues so they can orient themselves in society and make rational decisions. The other is to scrutinise authorities and to provide citizens with a basis for making independent assessments of government and those in power (Asp, 2007; Curran, 2002; Schudson, 2008).

Even when applied to situations of societal crisis, journalism has both an informative and investigative role. In critical situations, when human lives or property values are at stake, for example, the media has the potential to reach a large audience very quickly. At this stage, the primary purpose of both media and authorities is to warn the public and inform about dangers and how to protect oneself and get help. A relationship of both cooperation and dependency arises as the authorities constitute the most initiated news sources and the media the most effective channel of information dissemination (Vultee & Wilkins, 2012). From a citizen perspective, communication should enable relevant interpretations and sense-making of the crisis and appropriate protective measures to be taken.

As the crisis stabilises, however, and the authorities' actions aim at recovery and mitigation, the media is expected to take on its other role and to hold those responsible of handling the crisis to account, give a voice to those affected, and make the consequences of the crisis visible (Odén et al., 2016). At this point, journalism sets out to answer questions about how the crisis could have happened, if it could have been prevented, and if crisis management should

have been done differently. Consequently, the interests of the news media and authorities often collide (Boin et al., 2016), and tensions arise between how the responsible authorities attempt to frame the crisis and actions of mitigation, and how the news media frames the events (Boin et al., 2009; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Still, from a citizen perspective, the reporting of the news media should enable assessment and accountability of decision-makers involved in the crisis management.

The two roles of the news media generally follow each other chronologically; priority is first given to urgent information, and investigative reporting only comes into play when the consequences of the crisis are calculable, and the crisis is reaching an end (Vultee & Wilkins, 2012). However, the Covid-19 pandemic differs from an expected crisis development in at least two ways. First, infections spread in recurrent waves, which highlighted the informative role of media on numerous acute occasions. Second, the pandemic has been an extended crisis, which may have complicated the media's ability to review what happened and in retrospect investigate how it was handled.

The news media's reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to defining the understanding of the crisis and of the responsible politicians and authorities. How the news media in this way frames a crisis has a strong impact on how people perceive and understand it and how they assess the actions of politicians and authorities responsible for dealing with crises (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Frames refer to the context and particular emphases that news stories convey, and how they focus attention on topics and aspects of a situation, or centre events around a limited number of actors while excluding others. Different frames may interconnect to create a dominant impression of an event (Entman, 1993), and what is left out can be as important as what finds its way into a news story (Iyengar, 1991) (for an analysis of the different *governmental* framing of the pandemic in the Scandinavian countries, see Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3). The way the Covid-19 pandemic was framed thus reflects how the media balanced the priorities of conveying information that the government wanted disseminated and investigating the authorities' messaging and handling of the pandemic. What information did the news media in Iceland and Sweden provide on what was happening? Which themes – that is, the overall areas of events and conditions regarding the pandemic – dominated the reporting? When and to what extent did the news media question or criticise the experts' recommendations and the authorities' management of the pandemic? And which sources and actors were given priority in the news? Ultimately, the media's framing of the Covid-19 pandemic – and the themes that were present – reflects how they fulfilled their democratic roles during the ongoing crisis.

Representations of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nordic media studies

Several studies on the content of Nordic news media's reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic have been published. Most of them are country specific (Bach, 2020; Bjurwall et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2021; Eriksson & Stenius, 2020; Ghersetti, 2021; Ghersetti & Odén, 2021; Gylfadóttir et al., 2021; Martikainen & Sakke, 2021; Nielbo et al., 2021; Widholm & Mårtenson, 2021), some compare two or more Nordic countries (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2021), while others are included in comparative international research (Hansson et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of them analysed the reporting in relation to the democratic roles of the news media and the communicative needs of citizens during the ongoing crisis. Some of the studies presented in this section sought to identify which actors or perspectives were implicitly assigned the power to interpret and give meaning to what was happening in the news media's representations of the pandemic. One study analysed media content as a reflection of actual consumer behaviour during the pandemic, and others again give more descriptive overviews of actors and themes appearing in the news about the pandemic.

In one of these studies, Benestad Hågvær (2021) conducted a critical discourse analysis of which actors set the framework for how the pandemic should be understood in the Norwegian news media. Building on a "biomediatization" framework (Briggs & Hallin, 2016), Benestad Hågvær found that health institutions, public authorities, and journalists together constructed four different but complementary health-related journalistic discourses: the biomedical discourse, the consumer discourse, the society discourse, and the experience discourse. Implicitly, these actors also constructed understandings of science, family norms, demographic categories, patient role models, and more.

Likewise, in a Finnish study, Martikainen and Sakki (2021) have analysed how photographs in pandemic news reporting constructed subjects' position in different age groups. They identified four stereotyped age group positions in relation to the spreading of infection and upholding of society: children as bystanders, youths as a potential risk (villains), adults as bearing the responsibility (heroes), and elderly as isolated loners (victims). They also noted that the photographs constructed an intergroup divide between adults and the other age groups, designating the power and responsibility of handling the crisis to the former.

Comparing appearances of public leadership in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish news media's reporting of the swine flu in 2009 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Rubin and colleagues (2021) have discovered a shift from expert-driven media performances to political leaders in Norway and Denmark. In the Swedish media, however, health experts and politicians were equally

represented during both pandemics. In an attempt to relate the results to public trust, the researchers suggest that political leadership generated higher trust among the public than leadership that was equally based on political and scientific expertise.

In the studies of Giritli Nygren and Olofsson (2021) and Baekkeskov and colleagues (2021), the focus is less on the actors that shaped the news but rather on the underlying ideologies and perspectives that coined the reporting. Giritli Nygren and Olofsson (2021) studied how the public discourse on the preventive actions implemented in Sweden was narrated in the news media. Combining descriptive and discourse analysis of editorials and debate articles in Sweden's largest morning newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, they examined the development of crisis narratives and the struggle over legitimacy during the first phase of the pandemic. Their conclusion was that the analysed material was coined by underlying ideologies that enhanced the nation-state project and nationalism and a strive for cohesion, even in the contributions made by voices critical of the chosen strategy.

Baekkeskov and colleagues (2021) reached a similar conclusion in their comparative study of how pluralism was represented in Danish and Swedish media content. They found that arguments supporting the selected strategies of the two countries to contain infections were echoed in media reporting, leaving little space in the public debate for dissenting opinions or criticism. In news media reports of the countries' early Covid-19 responses, politicians (in Denmark) and leading experts (in Sweden) dominated the voices that were heard. The study concluded that media reporting favoured a one-policy option and thus tended towards monotony rather than pluralism, which would have required a balanced representation of alternative policies.

A slightly different Finnish study used news media coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic to draw conclusions about the pandemic's impact on grocery traders in the country. Departing from the logic that media attention reflects matters of substantial collective interest, Eriksson and Stenius (2020) identified six thematic consumer reactions in the news media content: panic-buying, changes in cooking behaviour, increased sensitivity towards the shopping environment, switching to online shopping, increased interest for new services, and careless in-store behaviour. Their conclusion was that consumers' grocery shopping behaviour changed substantially in the initial phase of the pandemic, creating stressful conditions for businesses (panic-buying and grocery shortages) as well as new opportunities (online grocery shopping).

In addition to the studies mentioned above, there are also some Swedish studies and one Icelandic study that have used more descriptive approaches to map the media content of the pandemic. In an automated content analysis of 19 Swedish news sites, Dahlgren (2021) found that the dominant topics in the news media during 2020 regarded how the virus should be handled politically

and medically, and how citizens should act. Similar results, with the addition of economic aspects of the pandemic, are found in other content studies from Sweden (Ghersetti, 2021) and Iceland (Gylfadóttir et al., 2021). Swedish studies (Ghersetti & Odén, 2021) also show that the news was alarmist, however, not more alarmist than in the reporting of the swine flu and Ebola, whose consequences in Sweden were not comparable to those of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The literature review presented here indicates that the Nordic news media shaped and framed the reporting about the Covid-19 pandemic – its actors, course, and consequences – in several different ways. However, none of the studies explicitly related the reporting to the communicative needs of citizens and the fundamental democratic roles of news media in crisis situations. Nor did any of them compare how the media fulfilled its democratic roles during the pandemic in Nordic countries with similar conditions for handling the pandemic, but very different outcomes in terms of infections and deaths. In response to this deficiency, in this chapter we attempt to evaluate how the media in Iceland and Sweden fulfilled their dual democratic roles during the pandemic: to provide the public with relevant and timely information and a basis for critically evaluating the actions of responsible politicians and authorities. As the pandemic had a similar development in both countries, and both adopted similar strategies to mitigate infections, we expect public authorities to be a major actor in the reporting. Likewise, we expect the most frequent themes to emphasise health but also give much attention to economics, as both countries highlighted the importance of keeping the economy robust. Given that the number of infected persons was many times higher in Sweden than in Iceland, we also expect the Swedish news media to be more critical of the implemented strategy of pandemic mitigation in comparison with Iceland. Moreover, we expect the Swedish news media to refer more to other countries than the Icelandic media, as there were ample examples that other countries were doing better in fighting the pandemic in general, and especially protecting vulnerable populations, compared with Sweden.

Data and method

The Icelandic data was collected using a database from the company Creditinfo called *Fjölmiðlavaktin* [*The Media Watch*], which consists of media content from all the main Icelandic news media outlets. The data was collected for a research project in Iceland where a stratified sample of media content from 21 Icelandic media outlets containing the words “COVID”, “Wuhan”, or “Kórón*” (the third word including all possible Icelandic versions of the word “corona”) from 1 January to 30 September 2020 has been coded. Large national media companies, as well as smaller and more marginal ones, were included. As the Icelandic

media landscape is quite small, even from a Nordic perspective (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021), it was possible to include a high proportion of news media outlets, resulting in a good reflection of the Icelandic media market.

For comparative purposes with the Swedish case, the scope has been narrowed here to include only the larger national outlets, *Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið* (Iceland's two biggest newspapers); their accompanying websites, *Frettabladid.is* and *Mbl.is*; three outlets from Iceland's largest private news media company, *Stöð 2* (television news), *Visir.is* (website), and *Bylgjan* (radio station); and four outlets from Iceland's public service broadcaster, RÚV (television station), *RUV.is* (website), and *Rás 1* and *Rás 2* (two radio stations). Since Icelandic national news outlets are small compared with those in the other Nordic states (Ólafsson, 2020), and therefore often produce fewer news stories, we included a larger number of outlets for the Icelandic case compared with the Swedish one. What is most important is that we relied on similar sources in both countries, but took into account the different media landscapes, most notably regarding size.

The Swedish content analysis was conducted on news reports about Covid-19 in the print editions of *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden's largest morning newspaper) and *Aftonbladet* (largest tabloid newspaper), and in the television news programme *Rapport 19:30* (largest news programme on public service television). The data was originally retrieved over five defined time periods in 2020 for the research programme KRISAMS (www.gu.se/en/research/krisams). All news reports were collected from the digital media archive *Retriver*, using the search terms "corona*" and "COVID*". In the KRISAMS project, content data was collected for five time-periods during 2020, in parallel with panel surveys that were also conducted.

To be able to compare the data, we used three of the time periods of the Swedish coding which coincided with periods available in the Icelandic dataset. Specifically, the following periods are included in this study: 24 February–9 March (when the first infected cases were registered in both countries); 31 March–14 April (in the middle of the first acute wave of infections and deaths in both countries); and 16 September–30 September (towards the end of the temporary decline in infections and deaths and just before the second big wave took off). From these three periods, every day was selected and coded in Iceland, but every other day in Sweden.

A total of 1,919 news reports were coded for the Icelandic part of the content analysis and a total of 1,189 in Sweden (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 *Number of coded and analysed Covid-19 news reports in Iceland and Sweden, 2020*

	Iceland	Sweden
24 Feb–9 Mar 2020	705	274
31 Mar–14 Apr 2020	560	730
16 Sep–30 Sep 2020	654	185
Total	1,919	1,189

Comments: The data was collected in separate research projects, using somewhat different coding schemes and samples. The Icelandic data is from a stratified sample from 11 of the largest news outlets in Iceland, coded each of the days in question. The Swedish data comes from 3 large news outlets in Sweden, coded every other day.

Three coders conducted the content analysis for the first period in Iceland and five coders for the latter two. To ensure intercoder reliability, all coders coded news reports together to ensure that they coded in the same way. After this was secured, each coder coded independently, yet during the coding process, the same news reports were regularly coded by another coder and results compared to ensure intercoder reliability. Furthermore, the research team met regularly and discussed any uncertainties and debatable questions. The coding for the Swedish data was conducted by one person only. Intra-coding reliability was controlled for each central variable in 10 per cent of all coded news reports (R-test, Cronbach's Alpha) in Sweden, and the statistical correlation ranged between 0.90 and 1.

Statistics on the total number of published news articles about Covid-19 from 1 January to 31 December 2020 in Iceland have been collected from *Fjölmiðlavaktin*. Statistical data on the number of infections during the same period has been collected from the Directorate of Health of Iceland [Embætti landlæknis] (<https://www.landlaeknir.is/english/>) and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management in Iceland [Almannavarnadeild ríkislögreglustjóra] (<https://www.almannavarnir.is/english/>) (see Covid.is, 2021). In addition, statistics on published articles in Sweden's largest daily newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Expressen*) have been collected from the digital media archive *Retriever* for the period of 1 January to 31 December 2020. Statistical data on deaths during the same period has been collected from The Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] (www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se).

For most tables and figures in this study, only news reports with a domestic arena – that is, with a focus on Icelandic and Swedish conditions and the development of the pandemic in the two countries – were selected. For both the Swedish and Icelandic datasets, the presence of critical tone has been classified, the main themes and the most dominating voiced actors, as well as the news

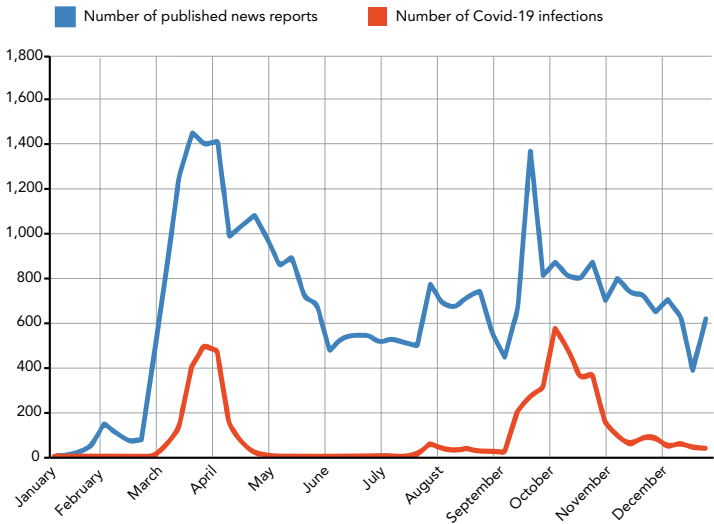
arena (other countries). Since the datasets were originally collected for separate research projects, adjustments have been made in both datasets to make them more comparable with each other. There will, however, inevitably be some limitations with the comparison, since different coding schemes were used.

Media coverage of Covid-19 in Iceland and Sweden

The first step of our analysis is to show the number of news reports published weekly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic during each time period (see Figures 10.1 & 10.2). Given the differences in population and the consequences of the pandemic in the two countries, the figure for Iceland shows the number of new infections per week, but the figure for Sweden shows the number of deaths per week. As an example, the number of deaths from Covid-19 was 9,771 in Sweden in 2020, compared with 29 in Iceland. In addition, the Icelandic public health authorities were much more aggressive in testing than their Swedish counterparts, resulting in numbers of infections being a good proxy for the actual prevalence in the population, where the numbers of deaths are more informative in Sweden. Most importantly, the numbers – despite relying on different indicators in the two countries – clearly illustrate the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and media coverage in the two countries.

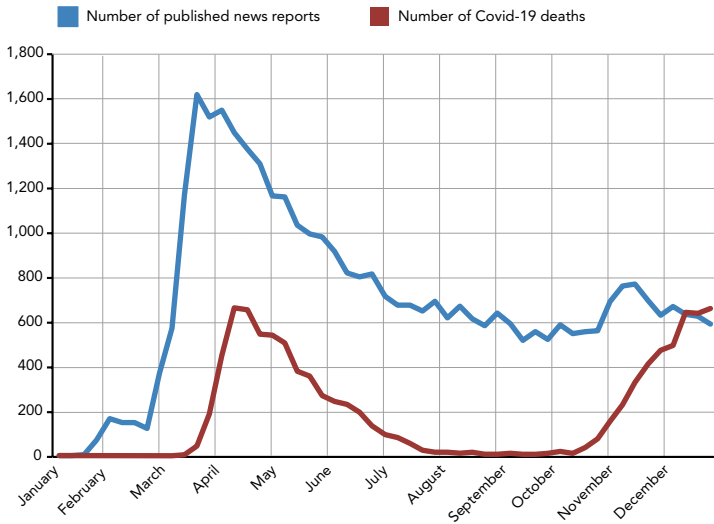
The figures show that coverage about the pandemic accelerated in both countries in late February, coinciding with the first cases diagnosed. This was followed by the most extensive coverage in March, reaching a peak of roughly 1,400 news reports in Iceland and more than 1,600 in Sweden. Interestingly, the coverage continued throughout the summer in both countries, even during times when there were no new cases in Iceland and only few deaths in Sweden. For example, there were still about 600 news stories in Iceland in June and July and similarly about 800 in Sweden in July and August, but Covid-19 cases were virtually absent in Iceland and at a low in Sweden. However, interesting differences between the two countries emerged at the beginning of the second wave: The Icelandic coverage appears to mirror the number of diagnosed cases, while the coverage remains stable in Sweden, even as deaths began to increase again in December and even exceeded death rates from April. Consequently, it seems that as the pandemic progressed in the two countries, the media in Iceland reacted quickly to what was happening, whereas the Swedish news media did not react to the pandemic despite it being clearly more serious in November and December, compared with the preceding months.

Figure 10.1 Number of published news reports and number of new infections per week in Iceland, 2020



Comments: The number of published news reports is determined from news outlets in the database *Fjölmiðlavaktin*. Statistical data on the number of infections has been collected from the Directorate of Health and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management in Iceland (see Covid.is).

Figure 10.2 Number of published news reports and number of deaths per week in Sweden, 2020

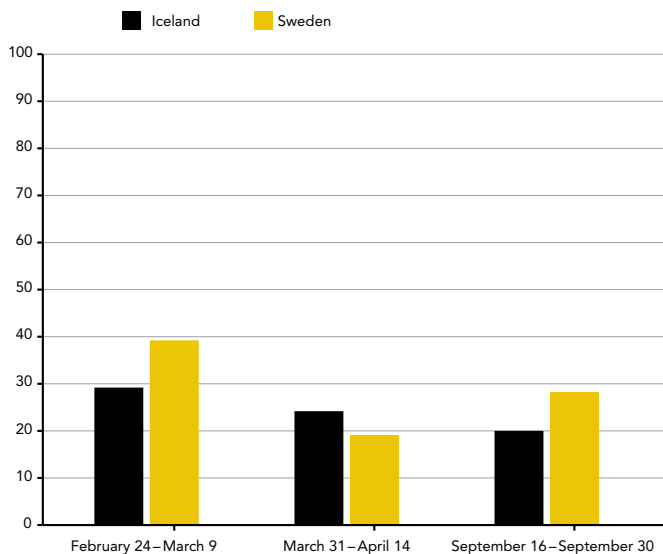


Comments: The number of published news reports is determined from three large news outlets in Sweden (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Rapport 19:30*).

Who was given voice in the media?

One of the key issues during the Covid-19 pandemic across countries was who was given the authority to speak about what was going on and how individuals and countries should respond (for a discussion of how justifying press conferences were used to legitimise the power of authorities to speak about the pandemic, see Kjeldsen, Chapter 5). Not surprisingly, the two key players emerging across nations were politicians and experts. Figure 10.3 shows the proportion of articles that gave a voice to an expert in the two countries, and overall, the Swedish discourse appears to have relied somewhat more on experts, with the exception of the second period. In Iceland, 29 per cent of news reports relied on an expert in the first period, 24 per cent in the second period, and 20 per cent in the third period. Comparable proportions for Sweden are 39 per cent, 19 per cent, and 28 per cent. If we look at individual experts that were given voice in the two countries, the three key players assigned a leading role by the authorities (often referred to as the trio) were most likely to be given voice in Iceland, specifically the director of health, Alma Möller (6%, 3%, 1%), Iceland's director of emergency management, Víðir Reynisson (9%, 2%, 5%), and especially the chief epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason (12%, 7%, 5%).

Figure 10.3 News reports that gave a voice to an expert, 2020 (per cent)

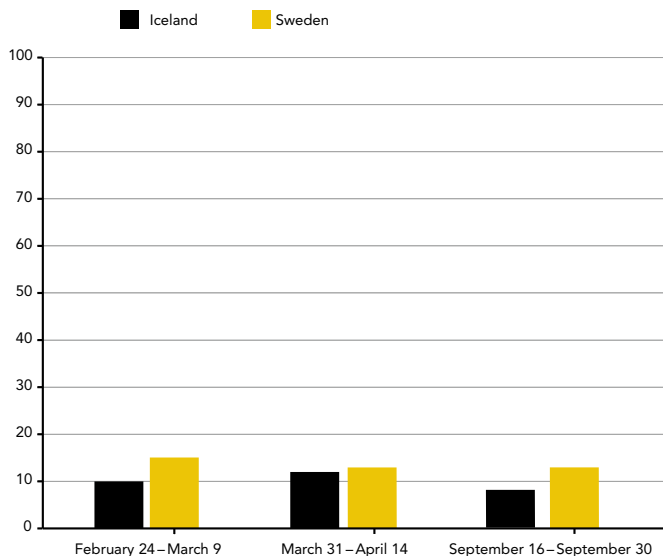


Comments: In the Icelandic news reports, all voiced actors were coded, while the Swedish coding only includes the two most dominating ones. 55 per cent of Swedish articles or news features have two or less voiced actors.

In Sweden, the chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, was most likely to be featured: in more than 8 per cent of articles in the first and third periods, and in about 6 per cent in the second. The second most cited expert, especially in the first period, was Johan Carlson, the director of the Public Health Agency of Sweden (4%, 2%, 2%).

Figure 10.4 shows the same for politicians who appear to have had a slightly larger role in the Swedish discourse compared with the Icelandic. About 10 per cent of the news reports gave a voice to a politician in Iceland in the first period, about 12 per cent in the second, and only 8 per cent in the third. In Sweden, about 15 per cent were given a voice in the first period and roughly 13 per cent in the second and third periods. Iceland's prime minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, was most likely to be featured: in about 3 per cent of Icelandic news stories in the first two periods, but in less than 1 per cent in the third period. All other politicians were given voice in less than 1 per cent of the reports, with the exception of the minister of health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir (1%), the minister of finance, Bjarni Benediktsson (2%), and the minister of justice, Áslaug Arna Sigurbjörnsdóttir (1%) in the second period. In Sweden, the minister for health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, was most likely to be given voice in the first and third periods (7%, 5%), whereas the Swedish prime minister, Steffan Löfven, was given voice in about 6 per cent of news reports in the first period, roughly 4 per cent in the second, and less than 2 per cent in the third. Other politicians in Sweden that were at some point featured in more than 2 per cent of articles were the minister of finance, Magdalena Andersson, and the minister for culture, Amanda Lind. As a caveat, we want to highlight how the different coding of experts and politicians may play a role in our conclusions. The coding was more conservative in Sweden (allowing only two actors) than in Iceland. The fact that the Swedish discourse gave a larger role to experts and politicians (with one exception) indicates that the differences between the countries might have been larger if the Swedish coding had been identical to the Icelandic coding.

Figure 10.4 News reports that gave a voice to politicians, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: In the Icelandic news reports, all voiced actors were coded, while the Swedish coding only includes the two most dominant ones. 55 per cent of Swedish articles or news features have two or less voiced actors.

Which themes dominated the reporting in the two countries?

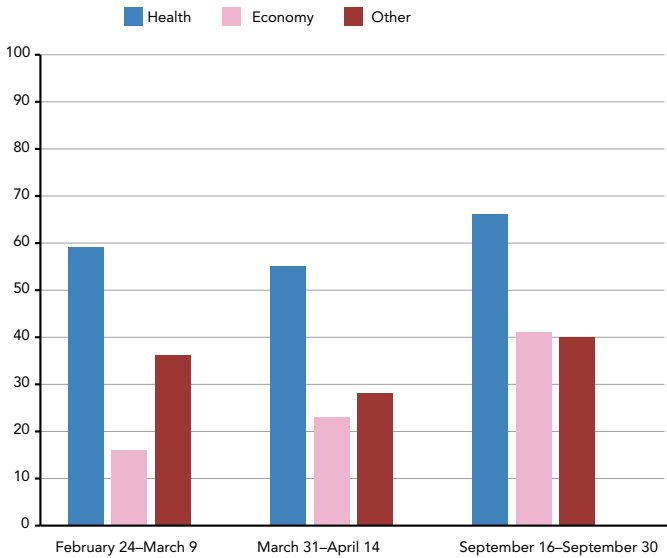
A key question that arises is what themes emerged in the two countries, and specifically, what was being talked about in the news reports focusing on Covid-19. Figures 10.5 and 10.6 show that reports in both countries were most likely to focus on health, but there are some differences between the countries. The coverage in Sweden was overwhelmingly on Covid-19 as a health issue in the first period (89%), while less than 60 per cent of the news stories in Iceland focused on health. Furthermore, the proportion of Swedish reports with a health theme decreased over time, whereas the proportion in Iceland was always between 55 and 67 per cent. The most prominent topics in Iceland concerned disease prevention, the virus itself, the healthcare system, and medical statistics. During the first and third periods, the single issue that received the most attention in Swedish news reports regarded the authorities' handling of the pandemic. Much attention was also paid to the spreading of infection in the first period, coinciding with the beginning of the pandemic. In the second period, in the midst of the first wave, issues concerning the capacity and resources of the healthcare system were highlighted.

The proportion of coverage focusing on economic issues is fairly similar in the two countries and increased over time in both. Specifically, the proportion

for Iceland is 17 per cent in the first period, 23 per cent in the second period, and 41 per cent in the third period. The same numbers for Sweden are 16 per cent, 28 per cent, and 35 per cent. The only difference observed is that there was slightly more focus on economic issues in the second period in Sweden and slightly more in Iceland in the third period. The main difference between the countries is that a much higher proportion of Icelandic news reports relied on other themes (28–40%), compared with Sweden (less than 10%). Themes coded under “other” in Iceland include security, foreign affairs, unemployment, environmental issues, arts, and sports. In Sweden, the themes coded concern issues of trust, information and communication, and social issues that are not included in the health or economic frames.

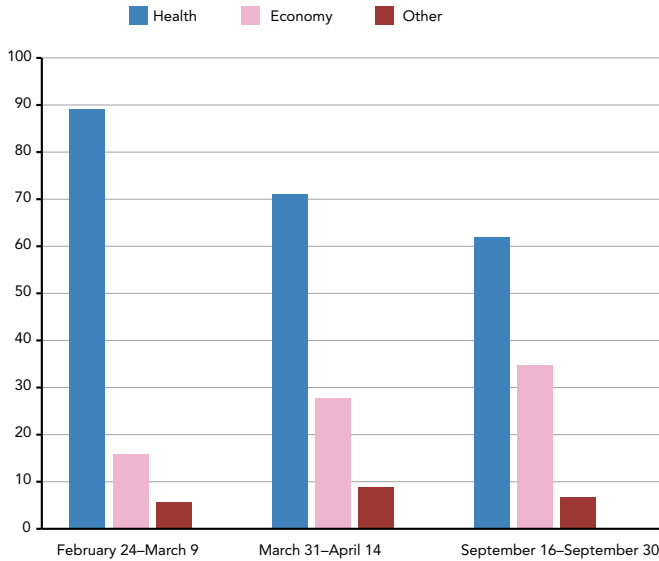
The difference we present between the two countries may be affected by a difference in coding, where the Swedish coding only included a main theme for each article, but the Icelandic coding allowed for multiple themes. These figures are therefore not directly comparable but give us insights into the focus of media discourse in the two countries, clearly showing the key importance of health, followed by the economy. In particular, this likely reduces the number of possible themes (and how frequently they were used) in Sweden, as it appears that the themes of health and economy are clearly the overarching themes in both contexts.

Figure 10.5 *Dominant themes in the Icelandic discourse, 2020 (per cent)*



Comments: Based on the coding, the Icelandic news reports could have multiple frames, whilst the Swedish coding only included one main frame for each news report.

Figure 10.6 Dominant themes in the Swedish discourse, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: Based on the coding, the Icelandic news reports could have multiple frames, whilst the Swedish coding only included one main frame for each news report.

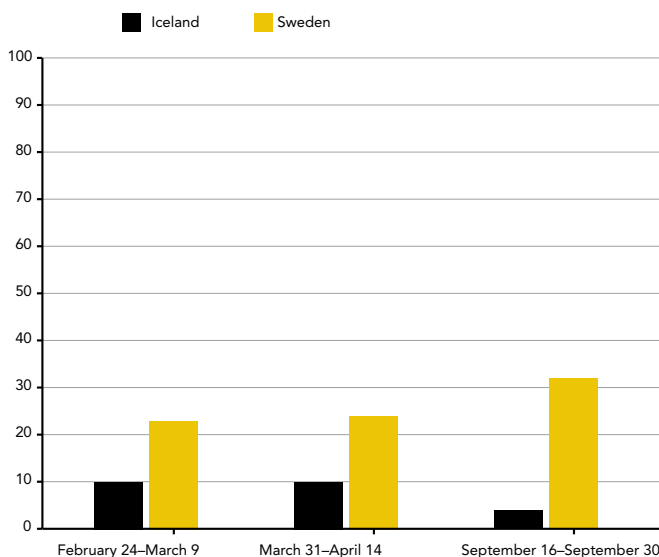
How critical was the discourse?

While the approaches taken by the two countries shared some similarities, the outcomes were drastically different, with more dire consequences in Sweden. Therefore, we might expect a more critical media discourse in Sweden – and that does in fact seem to be the case. This type of discourse is found in editorials, in detailed investigative reporting, or in news reports presenting critical or opposing voices. Figure 10.7 shows that only about 10 per cent of reports in Iceland presented any kind of criticism in the first two periods, dropping down to a mere 4 per cent in the third period. Conversely, about one-fourth of reports presented criticism in Sweden in the first two periods, with an increase to about one-third (32%) in the third period. Thus, we clearly see different trends in the two countries. Criticism decreased in the news reporting in Iceland between the first and the third periods, whilst it increased in Sweden.

The coding was somewhat different in the two countries: In Iceland, news stories were coded as critical if *any* criticism was present, while in Sweden, the coding represented a *specific* criticism of two of the main actors mentioned in the article. Of course, what was often criticised in Iceland were the actions and decisions of specific actors. The coding used suggests that the difference between the criticism in the two countries could be a conservative estimate, since the coding for the Icelandic reports was more open and encompassed any

type of criticism. If the same coding scheme had been used for both countries, the difference in criticism could therefore be even greater than what we found, further strengthening our conclusion that criticism was in fact more common in Sweden.

Figure 10.7 News reports that presented criticism, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: The notion of criticism was coded slightly differently in the two countries. In the Icelandic dataset, news reports were coded as critical if there was any criticism at all found in the reports. In the Swedish dataset, evaluations (criticism and praise/support) of the two most dominating actors mentioned in the news reports were coded. The figure shows the proportions of news reports where at least one mentioned actor was criticised, in each time period.

How international was the media coverage?

Table 10.2 presents the proportion of articles that focused on a specific country, both Iceland and Sweden themselves, but also key countries, most notably the other Nordic countries and the five most frequently mentioned countries in the news coverage in each country. As the Icelandic coding did not include coding of countries in the third period, we only evaluate this for the first two periods. Each news report could cover more than one country. The results show that both Icelandic and Swedish news coverage highlighted national issues, but that seems to be even more so in Iceland than in Sweden. Around 90 per cent of news reports in Iceland included Iceland in both periods, but only about 56 per cent of Swedish stories included Sweden in the first period, going up to 73 per cent in the second period.

Table 10.2 *Presence of selected countries, 2020 (per cent)*

	Iceland		Sweden	
	24 Feb–9 Mar	31 Mar–14 Apr	24 Feb–9 Mar	31 Mar–14 Apr
Iceland	88	92	0	0
Sweden	2	6	56	73
China	19	1	11	3
Denmark	3	8	2	1
Finland	1	5	1	1
France	–	–	4	1
Italy	28	1	23	2
Norway	2	1	2	1
Spain	14	1	–	–
UK	3	16	2	5
US	7	7	6	7

Comments: The table shows the Nordic countries as well as the five most frequently mentioned countries in Icelandic and Swedish news reports. In the Icelandic analysis, all countries mentioned in news reports were coded. In the Swedish analysis, the two most dominant countries were coded. Only two periods are included since the Icelandic coding scheme was updated in the autumn of 2020, and the research team stopped coding countries in news reports.

Media coverage in both countries mentioned other Nordic countries, but that was more common in Iceland, and the increase between the two periods is notable. Between 1 and 3 per cent of articles mentioned one of the other Nordic countries in the first period, but in the second period, the proportion reached 5 per cent for Finland, 6 per cent for Denmark, and 8 per cent for Sweden. Many of the news reports in the Icelandic media discussed harsh reactions in Denmark and how the Swedish approach seemed to differ from the approach taken by most countries. The proportions were lower in Sweden, and there was no notable increase between the two periods. Less than 3 per cent of news reports mentioned any of the other Nordic countries. What is noteworthy here is that it seems the international coverage in the Swedish media declined from the first period to the second.

Both countries covered Italy extensively in the first period, specifically, 28 per cent of news reports in Iceland and 23 per cent of reports in Sweden. This is not surprising, given that the first cases of Covid-19 in both countries came with tourists that had been skiing mostly in Italy or Austria, and Italy was the first European country to suffer severe consequences following the spread of Covid-19. Very few news stories focused on Italy in the second period. The same can be said for China: 19 per cent of Icelandic news reports mentioned China in the first period and 11 per cent in Sweden, but the proportion was

3 per cent or less in both countries in the second period. The prominence of China during the first period was related to coverage concerning the origins of the virus and the consequences of its spread. The coverage about the UK was more in Iceland, especially in the second period when 16 per cent of news reports mentioned the UK, but a comparable number for Sweden is 5 per cent. In both countries, 7 per cent of reports mentioned the US in both periods.

Conclusion

One of the clear similarities we found regarding Sweden and Iceland concerns the fact that the news value of Covid-19 peaked slightly *before* the number of infections (in Iceland) and number of deaths (in Sweden) during the first wave. This is not surprising, given the level of uncertainty when infections and deaths were still on the rise, particularly during the first wave of the pandemic. Little was known about the virus and the disease at the start, and images from China and Italy – heavily reported in both Iceland and Sweden – contributed to the alarming uncertainty. Subsequently, we saw the volume of news reports decrease once the initial wave subsided. The massive focus on Covid-19 in news reports during the uncertain period when the first wave was still on the rise was most certainly a contributing factor to the public perceiving the pandemic as being dangerous, altering their behaviour accordingly, and being more accepting of recommendations from authorities. With declining infection and death rates during mid and late 2020, the news value likewise decreased, although the pandemic remained a recurring item on the news agenda in both countries. As the relatively small second wave that led into the third wave gained traction towards the end of 2020, the pandemic received increased attention in Icelandic news, while it remained at a constant level in the Swedish media. Here, it seems that the pandemic was normalised in Sweden and thus lost news value, which suggests that even dramatic events may become part of everyday life over time.

We show that the health theme was dominant in news reports during the first wave. In Iceland, much emphasis was placed on solidarity and getting the whole population to participate in the fight against Covid-19. This was discussed with the popular tag line: *Við erum öll almannavarnir* [Civil defence is in our hands]. People shared this on social media and encouraged others to wash their hands, abide by the 2-metre distance rule, and follow other guidelines and rules. Most of the news reporting in Iceland was, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, along these lines. Emphasis was placed on using the daily information briefings from “the trio” as source material in the news reports. A survey conducted in Iceland in June 2020 found that over 90 per cent of Icelanders had received information regarding Covid-19 from news reports and the daily information briefings (Ólafsson, 2021a). The focus in the

briefings was on presenting a coherent and unified message (the importance of “flattening the curve” and keeping infections down), with little space given to differing viewpoints. This can be linked to the cornerstone of crisis communication: It is important to explain clearly to the public what is at stake, the causes of the crisis, and what the public must do. This type of discourse was clearly present in news reports in Iceland during the first wave, which was evident in how the information briefings and the experts were given much space in the information dissemination, usually with little or no questioning or criticism of the viewpoints.

In Sweden, too, the focus was on the pandemic as a health issue in news reporting. After first downplaying the likelihood of a fierce virus spreading in Sweden, the Public Health Agency’s strategy was to control Covid-19 until herd immunity was achieved. The goal was to “flatten the curve” (a similar discourse to Iceland), that is, to keep infection rates down (and thereby the statistical curve of infection and death numbers) so as not to overload healthcare resources. Support from the rest of society was almost universal, and in line with crisis communication practices. In his speech to the nation on 22 March 2020, the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, called on everyone to follow the authorities’ advice on keeping a 2-metre distance and to stay at home if infected. The political opposition kept a low profile in the matter, directing its rather lame criticism at the (poor) government’s financial support for businesses, but did not question the chosen strategy itself until after the first pandemic wave had subsided. Nor did the news media dedicate much attention to the different pandemic management and considerably lower death rates in the neighbouring Nordic countries, which may have put the Swedish strategy in perspective. Rather, focus was directed at countries that were worse off than Sweden. “Keep up, keep your distance” became an often-used slogan, that summarised the most important content of the Swedish strategy. In this spirit of national consensus, the Swedish news media was unable – or did not want – to present or make room for dissenting opinions. In fact, the few voices that questioned the Public Health Agency’s approach to the pandemic were themselves questioned and almost ridiculed in the public debate (Bjurwald et al., 2021). The media reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic’s first dramatic months followed the line of the authorities and the government. In this respect, the news media contributed to the authorities’ successful crisis communication, which was later indirectly confirmed by the Public Health Agency’s press manager, Christer Janson, in his tribute to the media’s support (Dagens Media, 2021).

To conclude, our analysis shows certain similarities between the Icelandic and Swedish news reporting of Covid-19 during the pandemic. It indicates that the media in both countries was more informative than investigative. There was much emphasis placed on supporting authorities’ strategies, and little room was given to outside voices and criticism. There was much focus on domestic cover-

age, and the discourse focused heavily on echoing health-related information from authorities. Both Iceland and Sweden chose milder strategies to contain the pandemic, but the results were drastically different. Whilst Iceland's strategy has been regarded as a success when compared with many other countries, the number of deaths in Sweden have been much higher than in most places. This raises important questions concerning the role of media during a crisis. To what extent should the news media assist authorities in presenting a clear and unified message during times of uncertainty, and where does the democratic watchdog role of the media fit in here? Moving forward, we would encourage researchers examining Covid-19-related news reporting to work closely together in systematically analysing the coverage. The comparison between Iceland and Sweden here is based on datasets using different types of coding schemes. This leads to limitations in comparing the data but still provides us with some insights into similarities and differences between how the Covid-19 pandemic was covered in the two countries. The results also lead to new questions about which factors, both inside and outside media organisations, have implications on how they fulfil their democratic roles.

Acknowledgements

The Icelandic part of the research was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (Grant no. 218058), the Icelandic Student Innovation Fund (Grant no. 206682-0091), and Creditinfo. We thank the coders involved and we are especially grateful to Kári Finnsson and Gréta Jónsdóttir for their assistance. The Swedish part of the research was conducted within the research programme Crisis Communication and Social Trust in a Multi-Public Society (KRISAMS), funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Grant no. 2017-2860).

References

- Andersson, S., & Aylott, N. (2020). Sweden and coronavirus: Unexceptional exceptionalism. *Social Sciences*, 9(12), 232–250. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9120232>
- Asp, K. (2007). Fairness, informativeness and scrutiny: The role of news media in democracy. *Nordicom Review*, 28(Jubilee Issue), 31–49. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-12238>
- Bach, M. (2020). *Da corona ramte klimadebatten* [When corona hit the climate debate]. Infomedia.
- Baekkeskov, E., Rubin, O., & Öberg, P. O. (2021). Monotonous or pluralistic public discourse? Reason-giving and dissent in Denmark's and Sweden's early 2020 Covid-19 responses. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1321–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942158>
- Benestad Hågvær, Y. (2021). Fire diskurser om korona: Autoritet, ansvar og virkelighetsbilder i helse-journalistikk om covid-19 i VG og Dagbladet [Four discourses on corona: Authority, responsibility and representations of reality in health journalism on Covid-19 in VG and Dagbladet]. *Norsk Medietidskrift*, 28(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2021-02-03>
- Bjurwald, L., Schonholzer, E., & Andén, A. (2021). *Maktens granskare eller maktens megafoner? Svensk journalistik under coronapandemin* [The scrutineers of power or the megaphones of power? Swedish journalism during the corona pandemic]. Näringslivets Medieinstitut.
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., & McConnell, A. (2009). Crisis exploitation: Political and policy impacts of framing contests. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(1), 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>

- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Briggs, C., & Hallin, D. C. (2016). *Making health public: How news coverage is remaking media, medicine, and contemporary life*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315658049>
- Covid.is. (2021). *Iceland's response*. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from <https://www.COVID.is/sub-categories/iceland-s-response>
- Curran, J. (2002). *Media and power*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203417744>
- Dagens Media. (2021, February 15). *FHM-chefens hyllning: "Det är tack vare medierna som vi nått våra mål"* [FHM chief's tribute: "It's thanks to the media that we have achieved our goals"]. <https://www.dagensmedia.se/medier/dagspress/fhm-chefens-hyllning-det-ar-tack-vare-medierna-som-vi-natt-vara-mal/>
- Dahlgren, P. M. (2021). *Medieinnehåll och mediekonsumtion under coronapandemin* [Media content and media consumption during the corona pandemic]. Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Eriksson, N., & Stenius, M. (2020). Changing behavioral patterns in grocery shopping in the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis – A qualitative study of news articles. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 8, 1946–1961. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2020.85119>
- Ghersetti, M. (2021). Den största nyheten [The biggest news]. In B. Johansson, & L. Truedsson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid* [Journalism in the time of corona] (pp. 23–44). Institutet för mediestudier.
- Ghersetti, M., & Odén, T. (2021). *Coronapandemin våren 2020: En undersökning om medier och opinion* [The corona pandemic in spring 2020: A survey of media and opinion]. MSB.
- Giritli Nygren, K., & Olofsson, A. (2021). Swedish exceptionalism, herd immunity and the welfare state: A media analysis of struggles over the nature and legitimacy of the Covid-19 pandemic strategy in Sweden. *Current Sociology*, 69(4), 529–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392121990025>
- Gylfadóttir, A. G., Ólafsson, J. G., & Ólafsdóttir, S. (2021). Framing the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Icelandic media: What were the key concerns and who could raise them? *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 17(1), 131–152. <https://doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2021.17.1.6>
- Hansson, S., Orru, K., Torpan, S., Bäck, A., Kazemekaityte, A., Frislid Meyer, S., Ludvigsen, J., Savadori, L., Galvagni, A., & Pigrée, A. (2021). Covid-19 information disorder: Six types of harmful information during the pandemic in Europe. *Journal of Risk Research*, 24(3-4), 380–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1871058>
- Houston, J. B., Spialek, M. L., & First, J. (2018). Disaster media effects: A systematic review and synthesis based on the differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication*, 68(4), 734–757. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy023>
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lecheler, S., & de Vreese, C. H. (2019). *News framing effects*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315208077>
- Martikainen, J., & Sakki, I. (2021). How newspaper images position different groups of people in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic: A social representations approach. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 31(4), 465–494. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2515>
- Nielbo, K., Baglini, R. B., Vahlstrup, P. B., Enevoldsen, K. C., Bechmann, A., & Roepstorff, A. (2021). *News information decoupling: An information signature in catastrophes in legacy news media*. arXiv, Cornell University. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2101.02956>
- Odén, T., Djerf-Pierre, M., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2016). *Kriskommunikation 2.0: Allmänhet, medier och myndigheter i det digitala medielandskapet* [Crisis communication 2.0: Citizens, media and public authorities in the digital media landscape]. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2020). Factoring size into the equation: Media studies, politics, and small states.

- Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, 2(1), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2020-0013>
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2021a). Communication, politics and Covid-19 in Iceland: The small state dimension. *Small States & Territories*, 4(1), 13–28. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/74991>
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2021b). Iceland: No lockdown and experts at the forefront. In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 239–247). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Ólafsson, J. G., & Jóhannsdóttir, V. (2021). Media and politics in Iceland. In E. Skogerbø, Ø. Ihlen, N. N. Kristensen, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries* (pp. 51–68). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855299-3>
- Pearman, O., Boykoff, M., Osborne-Gowey, J., Aoyagi, M., Gammelgaard Ballantyne, A., Chandler, P., Daly, M., Doi, K., Fernández-Reyes, R., Jiménez-Gómez, I., Nacu-Schmidt, A., McAllister, L., McNatt, M., Mocatta, G., Kjerulf Petersen, L., Simonsen, A. H., & Ytterstad, A. (2021). Covid-19 media coverage decreasing despite deepening crisis. *The Lancet, Planetary Health*, 5(1), E6–E7. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(20\)30303-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30303-X)
- Rubin, O., Baekkeskov, E., & Öberg, P. (2021). A media visibility analysis of public leadership in Scandinavian responses to pandemics. *Policy Design and Practice*, 4(4), 534–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.1943830>
- Schudson, M. (2008). News and democratic society: Past, present and future. *The Hedgehog Review*, 10(2), 7–21. Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.
- Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2021). *Theorizing crisis communication* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Therrien, F. (2018). *Nordic media: Similarities and changes in the digital age presented to Trine Syvertsen*. Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo.
- Vultee, F., & Wilkins, L. (2012). What's probable and what's possible: What the emergency community knows and what the journalists don't. In M. Steffens, L. Wilkins, F. Vultee, E. Thorson, G. Kyle, & C. Collins (Eds.), *Reporting disaster on deadline: A handbook for students and professionals* (pp. 11–16). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203148860>
- Widholm, A., & Mårtensson, F. (2021). Dramatiska och utmattande: Nio månader av coronanyheter i sociala medier [Dramatic and exhausting: Nine months of corona news in social media]. In B. Johansson, & L. Truedsson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid [Journalism in the age of corona]* (pp. 73–94). Institutet för mediestudier.
- Worldometers. (2021). *Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic*. Retrieved September 29, 1021, from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

Vaccine rhetoric, social media, and dissensus

An analysis of civic discourse between Norwegian health authorities and citizens on Facebook and Twitter during crisis

Jannicke Fiskvik, Andrea Vik Bjarkø,
& Tor Olav Grøtan

Software Engineering, Safety and Security, SINTEF Digital, Norway

Abstract

To shed light on the rhetorical aspects of communication during crisis, we examined the Norwegian discourse on Facebook and Twitter related to the issue of Covid-19 vaccines. Based on our review of recent Nordic studies, we compare our findings with existing studies on social media and Covid-19 in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. We apply the conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship in our analysis of the rhetorical practices by Norwegian health authorities and how citizens perceived, supported, or contested information about Covid-19 vaccines between July 2020 and March 2021. The analysis shows a change over time and a shift of moods and arguments reflecting the unfolding of the crisis, going from scepticism to optimism, to disappointment and critique of the health authorities. Observing that social media dynamics may further unproductive dissensus, we argue that rhetorical practices are an essential aspect of communication strategies to maintain civic deliberation and trust during crisis management.

Keywords: Facebook, Twitter, Covid-19 vaccines, rhetorical citizenship, vaccine dissensus

Fiskvik, J., Bjarkø, A. V., & Grøtan, T. O. (2023). Vaccine rhetoric, social media, and dissensus: An analysis of civic discourse between Norwegian health authorities and citizens on Facebook and Twitter during crisis. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 241–260). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-11>

Introduction

Social media has become an important arena for civic discourse. On the one hand, social media can be said to constitute a democratisation of the discussion of society (Lutz et al., 2014), but on the other, it can fuel the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and it can generate information overload and confusion (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Woolley & Howard, 2017). This applies also to the Nordics, which constitute one of the most digitalised regions in the world (Eimhjellen, 2018). Although Nordic citizens are known for their high level of trust in authorities (Martela et al., 2020), they also face challenges of disinformation and misinformation online (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020). Disinformation can be defined as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”; in contrast, misinformation is “misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognise it as such” (European Commission, 2018: 10). In times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, authorities must reach the public with proper information in an increasingly complex information environment (WHO, 2020).

A central topic in the civic discourse has been Covid-19 vaccines, which have been promoted as the solution to the pandemic by health authorities. In general, the issue of vaccines provides a specific communication challenge and certain prerequisites for civic discourse. In 2019, the World Health Organization identified vaccine hesitancy as a major threat to global health, accompanied by increased concern about the growth of online misinformation about vaccines (WHO, 2019). Overall, research has identified concerns about possible adverse effects, the effectiveness or safety of new vaccines, and lack of trust in institutions as common reasons for contesting vaccines (Faasse et al., 2016; Puri et al., 2020). Moreover, while the discourse is often characterised as pro- or anti-vaccine, many occupy a middle ground where they recognise the value of vaccines, but where potential dangers pose real concerns (Faasse et al., 2016).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the public’s perceptions and responses on Facebook and Twitter to the Norwegian health authorities’ handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on vaccines. Two research questions are raised:

- RQ1. How do citizens support or contest information about Covid-19 vaccines as conveyed by health authorities on Facebook and Twitter?
- RQ2. How can we understand the authorities’ rhetorical practices in the interaction with citizens on social media?

Few of the existing studies that address the issues of social media and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries have been carried out in Norway.

We seek to fill this gap and complement existing studies by examining Facebook and Twitter discussions about vaccines in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Norwegian context. While most Nordic studies use other types of sources, such as interviews and surveys, to shed light on social media dynamics, we provide new insights in this chapter by analysing material collected from social media. Although our focus is on Norway, we draw comparisons between our findings and empirical findings in other Nordic countries.

To achieve a better understanding of the vaccine rhetoric on social media, we apply the conceptual framework of “rhetorical citizenship” (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2017), a concept that emphasises the discursive dimension of citizenship, advocating the need for critical observation, description, and evaluation of the rhetoric being used. This chapter is based on a unique dataset with 4.6 million posts and comments written in Norwegian and collected from Facebook and Twitter. The data comprises discussions around Covid-19 vaccines during 1 July 2020–31 March 2021.

The next section provides a brief overview of existing Nordic studies. This is followed by a section that presents the conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship and describes the methods used and the empirical data material. Next is a section with an analysis of the Covid-19-vaccine discourse on Facebook and Twitter, focusing on posts by Norwegian health authorities and reactions from the public. We also compare our findings with existing studies on social media and Covid-19 in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Thereafter, the main findings are discussed through the lens of rhetorical citizenship. In the final section, we conclude the analysis and suggest possible future research avenues.

The Nordic context: Social media and Covid-19

Recent studies investigating social media dynamics and the Covid-19 discourse in the Nordics can be broadly divided into two categories: 1) scientific communication and public perceptions, and 2) misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. In addition, although it does not specifically address Covid-19, a third category includes studies that provide insights into vaccine attitudes and perceptions in the Nordic countries.

Among the studies addressing scientific communication and public perception, trust is a central issue (for a discussion of how high trust in the Nordics influenced the public’s support of their governments’ Covid-19 strategies, see Johansson et al., Chapter 13). Analysing the Danish Twitter landscape in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Breslin and colleagues (2022) found that the pandemic situation and the partial lockdown by the Danish government led to a rise in Danish tweets about trust. More than half of the analysed tweets expressed mistrust, largely towards the government, authorities, and institutions.

The study suggests that these tweets were an instance of affective nationalism, whereby Danish identity was communicated, and with Twitter as an arena where norms, values, and ideas connected to the crisis were negotiated.

A study that compared how people in Denmark and Sweden search for and perceive Covid-19 information found that Danes and Swedes, in general, trust information from health authorities and researchers (Stjernswärd et al., 2021). Although the Danish and Swedish governments opted for different strategies for handling the pandemic, there are similarities between the two countries. Drawing on a web-based survey, Stjernswärd and colleagues (2021) observed that in both countries, television was reported as the most reliable source of information, while Facebook was the most used social media platform to get information about Covid-19. Danes, however, were more likely to use social media to search for information from other sources, such as politicians and healthcare professionals.

On the other hand, during the pandemic in Finland, the expertise of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos] became increasingly contested. Analysing the main motivations and argumentations in this public contestation on Twitter, Välvirronen and colleagues (2020) identified three typical forms of critique: 1) a liberalist critique, which criticised the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare for old-fashioned policies, lack of transparency, and for being too bureaucratic; 2) critique of the epidemiological models and the technical understanding of these as well as the competence of the authorities; and 3) critique against too lax infection-control measures involving the promotion of strict lockdown measures. Furthermore, the main critics were found to be, among others, opposition politicians, technology experts, scientists, and various groups of active laypersons. Interestingly, the study sheds light on how alternative forms of expertise are promoted when the public, as part of Twitter networks, questions established expertise.

In parallel with the spread of Covid-19, there has been a surge of online disinformation and conspiracy theories concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly on social media (EEAS, 2021). A survey study drawing on data from Denmark and Germany shows that encountering and believing in conspiracy theories about governmental reaction to Covid-19 are linked with less institutional trust and less support for and adoption of regulations (Pummerer et al., 2020). Moreover, disinformation is perceived as a challenge that can undermine the democratic process (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020). However, with social media blurring the authenticity and correctness of information, it is difficult to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation (Glasdam & Stjernswärd, 2020). For example, it has been found that while much of the international reporting on the course of events in Sweden was balanced and mostly accurate, it did contain misinformation and truths taken out of context (Irwin, 2020). This, in turn, gave rise to further misinterpretation on social media. The nar-

rative of Sweden following a herd immunity strategy – and implicitly risking people’s lives – was given a great deal of attention. It overshadowed the more accurate narrative that described the Swedish authorities’ hope that some level of herd immunity would be a positive side effect; however, it was not the main strategy (Irwin, 2020).

A web-based survey analysis of vaccine confidence and attitudes towards vaccination among Swedish parents found that vaccine refusers to a greater extent searched for information online and on social media (Byström et al., 2020). The study found that the main reasons for questioning or refusing a vaccine were concerns over adverse events, as well as negative information or lack of information. Similar arguments have also been found in Finland based on qualitative in-depth interviews with Finnish parents who refused several or all vaccines for their children (Nurmi & Harman, 2020). Three categories of reasons were identified: risks and effects of vaccinations; distrust towards vaccination recommendations made by health officials and medical professionals due to perceived bias in medical research; and health perceptions and practices, where parents adhered to complementary and alternative medicine treatments and health understandings.

Overall, the above review of Nordic studies indicates that the dissensus embedded in the civic reactions and deliberations related to Covid-19 echoes fundamental concerns related to issues such as safety and lack of trust in science and societal institutions.

The conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship

Social media has gained immense popularity over a short time span. Citizens, businesses, and public and private agencies post and share content and react and comment to promote views and agendas in widely different forms. Importantly, social media have become an arena for the deliberation of public issues – both among citizens and between citizens and national authorities (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Rhetorical citizenship is a conceptual frame that seeks to capture the ways citizenship is discursively constituted and enacted. It was first coined by Kock and Villadsen (2012), who took a republican view of citizenship, which sees deliberation as the essence of a contemporary democracy. As such, rhetorical citizenship is a useful analytical approach for understanding the civic discourse taking place on different online platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

In the frame of rhetorical citizenship, citizenship is understood as a discursive phenomenon, in the sense that important civic functions take place in deliberations among citizens, and thus form a central part of civic engagement. The term rhetoric has a twofold definition: On the one hand, rhetoric is the

practice of civic communication, and on the other, it is the academic study of it (Kock & Villadsen, 2012).

Rhetorical citizenship involves both a descriptive and a normative dimension. The former aims to understand the practical discourse on public issues, while the latter brings attention to notions of empowerment, inclusivity, and discourse ethics. Regarding the descriptive dimension, we aim to analyse how citizens and authorities communicate about Covid-19 vaccines. Kock and Villadsen distinguish between elite rhetoric and vernacular discourse. Elite rhetoric directs our attention to Facebook posts and Tweets by national authorities and public figures. In contrast, vernacular discourse emphasises the informal and everyday instances of civic interaction between citizens (Kock & Villadsen, 2012, 2017). With the importance of paying attention to context for understanding the rhetoric, central considerations are the forms of participation we observe, who participates, and how speaking positions are allotted and organised. Vernacular discourse can also include a wide range of non-discursive manifestations and objects, for example, likes, emojis, and memes, “through which citizens interpret and enact their roles as citizens” (Kock & Villadsen, 2017: 572).

Although we do not take a normative stance regarding the specific views on Covid-19 vaccines, we draw on the normative part of rhetorical citizenship in its attention to the empowering and emancipatory aspects of rhetoric in society (Kock & Villadsen, 2012). Key questions for both elite and vernacular discourse are, then, whether the practical rhetoric furthers constructive civic interactions or stops the debate, whether actors are privileged or excluded, and whether the rhetoric builds or undermines trust (Hoff-Clausen & Ihlen, 2015). Lastly, the normative aspect of rhetorical citizenship underlines the importance of conflicting desires in a democracy. While deliberation is seen as essential for democracy, it is not believed that deliberation necessarily will, or should, lead to consensus. Instead, dissensus is seen as intrinsic in a democracy and central in rhetorical practices (Kock & Villadsen, 2012).

Methods and data material

For the data collection and analysis of open Facebook posts and comments and tweets on Twitter, we have relied on a tool and method developed by SINTEF for scraping, parsing, and analysing data (Grøtan et al., 2020). Following the conceptual framework of rhetorical citizenship, we do not aim to quantify the empirical data from social media, but rather perform a textual analysis to evaluate the rhetoric on Covid-19 vaccines.

For the study of the vaccine discourse, we have analysed Facebook and Twitter data from 1 July 2020–31 March 2021. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Norway, where 83 per cent of the population has a profile

and, strikingly, 69 per cent of the population use the platform daily (Ipsos, 2021). Only 27 per cent of the Norwegian population have a Twitter profile, and 9 per cent use Twitter daily (Ipsos, 2021). However, Twitter is an important part of the networked sphere in which political issues are discussed (Breslin et al., 2022). Thus, Facebook was chosen as the main empirical material for this study, with data from Twitter functioning as a smaller, complementary sample.

The analysed data material is a subset of a larger dataset collected for the research project, *Pandemic Rhetoric, Trust and Social Media: Risk Communication Strategies and Public Reactions in a Changing Media Landscape (PAR-TS)*. The project investigates current communication strategies of Norwegian health authorities, reactions in the public in terms of trust, fear and behavioural change, and the role of social media in the crisis (Ihlen, 2020). The PAR-TS dataset was collected to include Facebook and Twitter data that was relevant for the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Norway. The collection was based on a comprehensive thematic Norwegian Covid-19-related keyword list for Twitter, whereas for Facebook, we collected posts, including comments, from web pages of the government, politicians, health authorities, and Norwegian newspapers. From a pool of approximately 4.6 million open Facebook posts and comments and tweets, we then filtered for relevant posts and comments using a query of two keyword groups in Norwegian, thematically focused on health authorities and vaccines (these keywords were “vaccine”, “Pfizer”, “Moderna”, “AstraZeneca”, “Janssen”, “Johnson”, “Sputnik”, “FHI”, “Institute of Public Health”, “Ministry of Health”, “Directorate of Health”, “authorities”, “government”, “health authorities”, “Prime Minister”, “Minister of Health”, “Solberg”, “Guldvog”, “Nakstad”, “Høie”, “Stoltenberg”). Results that were not relevant to the vaccine discourse and duplicates were then excluded. As a result, the empirical data analysed include a combination of posts by politicians and Norwegian health authorities mentioning vaccines with related comments, and comments by lay people referring both to health authorities and Covid-19 vaccines. In sum, we analysed 8,478 Facebook posts and comments and 469 Tweets.

During the first qualitative exploration phase, we performed an initial sentiment analysis of the data. During this phase, we held frequent meetings to discuss our observations from the qualitative explorations. Consequently, we identified changes in sentiment over time, which led us to divide the empirical data into three phases, as outlined in the following section. Furthermore, different thematic categories were identified in the data according to the various sentiments that we observed being expressed in the vaccine discourse. Before the main analysis phase, we thus established a set of themes (see Table 11.1) (Glasdam & Stjernswärd, 2020; Väliverronen et al., 2020). The data was subsequently analysed qualitatively with the use of a loosely structured thematic coding document (Glasdam & Stjernswärd, 2020), where the different themes

and subthemes were counted, and example citations were noted. Furthermore, we analysed the data chronologically and within the context of their discussion threads.

Table 11.1 *Categories of themes and subthemes*

Themes by sentiment	Subthemes
Critical of authorities' Covid-19 vaccine policies	Does not agree with the vaccination policy Critical of the competence of government or health authorities Believes in conspiracy theories about the vaccine
Positive towards authorities' Covid-19 vaccine policies	Agrees with the vaccination policy Trusts the competence of government or health authorities
Critical of Covid-19 vaccines	Fearful of adverse effects Critical of the lack of information about vaccine development and content Believes in conspiracy theories about the vaccine
Positive towards Covid-19 vaccines	Considers the vaccine to be the solution to the pandemic Believes the vaccines to be safe

To preserve the privacy of individuals and in accordance with the GDPR agreement with Sikt (formerly the Norwegian Center for Research Data), we cannot refer to or quote a private individual's account directly. Therefore, citations from the accounts of private individuals have been paraphrased. Each paraphrased user is given a numbered reference in the text chronologically after the date of the post (e.g., Facebook user 1). Moreover, we have translated all citations in Norwegian to English.

Norwegian vaccine rhetoric on Facebook and Twitter

After mid-2020, the debate regarding vaccines became increasingly relevant. The strategy of Norwegian health authorities involved limiting infection and “flattening the infection curve” to avoid too many sick people at the same time, until vaccination could be initiated (Norwegian Government, 2021). With the European Union providing conditional approval of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, the Norwegian government put forward its aim and prioritisations for the Covid-19 vaccine on 4 December 2020. Later that month, the government announced the arrival of a batch of vaccines, with the first vaccine injection in Norway administered on 27 December 2020 (Norwegian Government, 2021).

In this section, we analyse the vaccine discourse on Facebook and Twitter. Our aim is not to quantify the data material, but to describe and evaluate the rhetoric by public figures (elite rhetoric) and lay people (vernacular discourse) before we, in the following section, discuss the main findings in light of rhetorical citizenship. Based on our initial analysis, three phases and their change of sentiment emerged from the empirical data, which we address accordingly: 1) July–November 2020, a solution approaches; 2) turn of the year 2020–2021, hope dominates; and 3) February–March 2021, the tide turns.

A solution approaches

In Norway, Covid-19 vaccines entered the arena of civic discourse on Facebook and Twitter in mid-2020, as reports were coming in that the development of several vaccines was close to being achieved. Our data material from Twitter during this period is, however, scarce. Although many tweeted about vaccines in general, few connected vaccines to Norwegian health authorities. In comparison, there was more active discussion on Facebook. This phase is marked on Facebook by an overall scepticism and fear of adverse effects connected to the fast development of the vaccines and their seemingly hasty approval.

On 14 August 2020, the Norwegian minister of health, Bent Høie, published a post on his official Facebook account as an encouragement to the Norwegian people:

I know that many are having a hard time now. The holiday is over, and the end of summer is near. Winter is coming, as they say in *Game of Thrones*. [...] Every day, work is taking place that can lead us a bit closer to an effective vaccine. A vaccine will maybe give back to us what we all long for. An everyday life without a life-threatening virus. [...] (Høie, 2020)

The rhetoric in this post is sympathetic and invitational, which was a common trait for the many Facebook posts by the minister of health at the time. He recognised the difficulties the people were facing and put forward the vaccine as the solution. Moreover, Bent Høie often called for *dugnad*, a much-used word in Norwegian meaning to make a common effort, urging citizens to act for the common good (for further discussion of how the concept of *dugnad* was harnessed during the crisis, see Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3; Almlund et al., Chapter 6).

Reviewing the vernacular discourse during this period, many were positive and praised the minister of health for good and clear communication. Predominantly, however, people were concerned and sceptical. Among those who were concerned about the safety of the Covid-19 vaccines, we found two separate groups of users on Facebook: those who were sceptical of the vac-

cine due to fear of adverse effects, and those who tied the vaccine to a wider Covid-19 conspiracy.

Those who were sceptical of the Covid-19 vaccines were mainly concerned with the fast development, the uncertainty around the different types that were being developed, and the lack of information about them. This direction seems to be expressed by the majority of those who were active in the vaccine debate at that time. Some were clearly distrustful. One Facebook user stated that they had no confidence in the pharmaceutical industry, nor in the Norwegian healthcare system (Facebook user 4, 14 October 2020). Others argued that alternative remedies are both safer and healthier options than vaccines. Many listed previous negative experiences with vaccines as reasons for their fear. One Facebook user asked whether people had forgotten the Pandemrix vaccine and the swine flu, where an untested vaccine was pushed on the citizens, and as a result, thousands had long-term side effects and pain (Facebook user 1, 1 July 2020). Since the swine flu vaccine was also recommended for mass vaccination by the Norwegian health authorities (Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2012), some Facebook users raised concerns about the trustworthiness of the health authorities. These arguments promoted by vaccine sceptics, which resonate with studies from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland (Agergaard et al., 2020; Byström et al., 2020; Nurmi & Harman, 2020), indicate that the vaccine issue causes the same concerns across the Nordic countries, independent of the type of vaccine.

The second direction of vaccine scepticism concerns fear that the vaccines are part of a worldwide conspiracy to take control over people. For instance, one Facebook user asked Høie if the vaccine includes the insertion of a nanochip and demanded an answer (Facebook user 3, 30 September 2020). The vernacular discourse on this topic was dominated by individuals who were convinced that the Covid-19 pandemic was planned. The Western world elite was presented as responsible, and actors frequently mentioned were Bill Gates, the pharmaceutical industry, and high-level Norwegian politicians. One Facebook user retorted that the minister of health is a “bluffer”, and that the government is making use of scaremongering to peddle the genetically modified vaccine of Bill Gates (Facebook user 2, 9 September 2020). This corresponds to the study on Denmark and Germany, which found that persons believing in conspiracy theories regarding the governmental reaction to Covid-19 have less institutional trust (Pummerer et al., 2020). Our findings also resonate with the annual threat assessment of the Norwegian Police Security Service, which highlights the growing online activity of people expressing anti-government attitudes, especially in connection with conspiracy theories involving Covid-19 (PST, 2022).

Hope dominates

As the vaccines were approved in the European Union and subsequently in Norway, there was a shift from a general scepticism concerning the vaccines to more reassured opinions. In general, the topic of vaccines created much discussion during this period.

On 27 December 2020, Prime Minister Erna Solberg tweeted her joy and optimism: “We are waiting for the first vaccine”, with an attached image of her taking part in a digital meeting with the governing mayor of Oslo and the minister of health (Solberg, 2020). The occasion was a live broadcast of the first person in Norway to receive a dose of the vaccine. What followed was an interesting exchange of comments between the prime minister and various Twitter users. Many commented that Solberg should be vaccinated first, while others stated that they would not be vaccinated. In this Twitter thread, there were several replies from Solberg. All were relatively short, and most replies conveyed a sense of patience and calm: “[I will get vaccinated] when it is my turn in the queue, healthy people between 55–65” and “Of course, but [I] won’t cut in line” (Solberg, 2020). One reply from Solberg, however, was very direct, commanding specific commentators to “stop spreading lies” (Solberg, 2020).

Considering the rhetoric by the minister of health and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [Folkehelseinstituttet] on Facebook, we observed that they took the opportunity to present the vaccination process as the light at the end of the tunnel. As stated by Høie in a Facebook post on 6 January 2021:

The vaccine makes us see a light at the end of the tunnel, but we must reduce the infection now so that the winter and spring will be easier. I understand that many are impatient and want the vaccination to happen faster. But we are underway. And it has happened faster than we dared hope for. (Høie, 2021a)

Høie continued during this period to encourage citizens to contribute to a common effort for the common good. A usual feature of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health’s posts is that they answered most of the questions asked, and occasionally linked to their web page: “Hi [...]. Fortunately, the vaccine(s) seem to be working very well, with no serious adverse effects. So, we know a way out of this, although it will take some time before the restrictions can be eased” (NIPH, 2020). By being active and replying to Facebook users, the institute engaged in the civic discourse and contextualised information, and thus avoided the risk of further misinterpretation on social media (Irwin, 2020).

From a vernacular discourse perspective, we observed practically oriented discussions on both Facebook and Twitter throughout this phase of optimism. At this point in time, citizens expressed satisfaction with the authorities and confirmed their part in making a common effort. In general, people expressing support were rather short in their comments. The rhetoric signals willingness

to do their part to ensure the well-being of society. For instance, one Facebook user commented that they are for a common *dugnad* – that is, for a common goal to reach a normal everyday life further down the road – and that they hope as many as possible will take the vaccine, since it will benefit everyone (Facebook user 6, 21 December 2020). Many also expressed appreciation towards the Norwegian Institute of Public Health for answering their questions. One Facebook user stated it was good that they provided information about the effects of the vaccine and expressed hope that the public would be properly informed (Facebook user 7, 22 December 2020). Others expressed appreciation for a job well done and stated that they trust the authorities.

Importantly, there was also a shift during this phase, with more replies and counter-arguments against those who were sceptical of vaccines and those who were sharing conspiracy theories. For example, a Facebook user commented to another Facebook user that they should stick to Harry Potter, since they were presenting magic and rose therapy as a better solution than vaccines, and moreover, that they should stop spreading lies and conspiracy theories about the vaccine (Facebook user 5, 2 December 2020).

The tide turns

The arrival of Covid-19 vaccines to Norway coincided with a second wave of infections. Consequently, the population was under many restrictions and lockdowns in several places in the country. Especially Oslo and its surrounding regions had heavy restrictions during November 2020–February 2021, due to high infection rates (Norwegian Government, 2021). Thus, the hope of vaccines being the solution to the pandemic soon dwindled alongside the perceived slow pace of administering vaccinations. This phase was marked by a greater degree of contestation and alternative views of the messages conveyed by the government and health authorities.

As the administration of vaccines was underway, citizens questioned the safety of the vaccines. At the end of January 2021, 30 deaths among elderly people who had been vaccinated received considerable attention. The issue was addressed by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH, 2021) in a Facebook post:

Most nursing home residents have now been vaccinated. [...] The Norwegian Medicines Agency publishes weekly overviews of suspected side effects. Per 21 January, they have reported 30 deaths. This does not mean that there is a causal link between the deaths and the vaccine. A common feature of these deaths is that they have occurred among frail and elderly nursing home residents with serious underlying diseases. [...] But the Norwegian Medicines Agency and the Institute of Public Health have good routines and will go

through each case thoroughly to investigate whether any of the cases may be related to the vaccines.

The post has a factual tone and appears to aim at easing concerns among citizens, to avoid scaremongering, and at the same time build the public's trust in the institute. Central goals of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health on social media have been to maintain trust, answer questions, and correct factual errors and allegations, as well as listen to and invite dialogue with the public (NIPH, 2022).

On 24 February 2021, Høie published another long Facebook post mainly devoted to the issue of vaccination. He stated that although the vaccinations were progressing, most of the restrictions placed on the population would continue. Nevertheless, he ended the post by encouraging citizens to persevere:

We are moving towards brighter times. However, I would like to remind you that we are still in a vulnerable situation. If we release the measures prematurely, or if fewer people follow the national and local infection control recommendations, there is a risk that the infection will rise rapidly and that we will lose control. This must not happen. Therefore, endure the last stage as well – we have never been closer to the finish line. (Høie, 2021b)

The post conveys optimism but also emphasises how citizens should behave. The minister of health continued to urge for a common effort, highlighting community priorities and citizens' options and saying that by not following government recommendations, the situation would turn dire.

On Facebook in particular, we saw a shift from the spirit of “a common effort” and praise of health authorities to a general disenchantment. The debate atmosphere was marked by angry comments and much criticism toward the authorities. As opposed to the rather short comments by those who were supportive, those who were critical often wrote long and emotional posts. Very few commentators praised the health authorities at that point. For instance, one Facebook user stated that the Norwegian people are slowly but steadily being led into a dictatorship, that the new world order is approaching, and that people just cannot see it due to fear and scaremongering (Facebook user 8, 28 February 2021).

An important trend was more link-sharing from Facebook to alternative news media, social media sources, and case-specific websites presenting alternative views of the pandemic that lean in the direction of conspiracy theories (e.g., BitChute) rather than to traditional media sources. This alternative information included both misinformation and conspiracy theories. An example of misinformation was the circulation of rumours that one adverse effect of the vaccine is sterilisation. Moreover, those sharing conspiracy theories strongly

contested the information from authorities. For example, one Facebook user refuted that mRNA vaccines are indeed vaccines and stated that we are dealing with gene therapy of people (Facebook user 9, 22 March 2021). Competing narratives were also found in Finland (Välvirronen et al., 2020), which strengthens the notion that when established expertise is contested, alternative expertise is advocated.

There was also considerable dissensus on Twitter, but the dissensus was predominantly among citizens. The vernacular discourse was mainly factual and can be described as constructive civic interaction. At the same time, the issue of vaccine certificates – documentation of completed vaccination against Covid-19 – triggered heated discussions and strong emotions. A common feature of the Norwegian tweets on this topic is the use of exclamation marks, angry emojis, and capital letters. Those critical of the possible introduction of vaccine certificates expressed concerns about privacy, restriction of freedoms, and that the certificates contradict the fact that vaccinations are voluntary. Many were clearly frustrated, exemplified by one Twitter user who stated that people are discriminated against when one is not allowed to participate in society without taking what is perceived as an experimental vaccine (Twitter user 1, 2 March 2021). Moreover, Twitter users tied the issue of vaccine certificates to totalitarian regimes and a breach of the rule of law and human rights. One argued that if people continue listening to the authorities, we will move into a totalitarian society without rights, acting as sheep (Twitter user 3, 14 March 2021). This critique corresponds to the study of the public contestation of the expertise of Finnish health authorities, with critique that liberal rights are infringed (Välvirronen et al., 2020). Counter-arguments to this rhetoric underlined that several countries demand vaccination against other diseases, or entry visa, and that as citizens, we have obligations and responsibilities as well as freedoms and rights. For example, one Twitter user retorted that no one is refusing people the right to travel or express their opinions, however, that with being part of a community comes certain demands which one can either accept, or not accept and miss an opportunity (Twitter user 2, 3 March 2021). These types of negotiations about what it entails to be a citizen, which were also found on Danish Twitter (Breslin et al., 2022), indicate that a broad-reaching crisis triggers reflections on society and our roles as citizens.

Discussion

In this section, we take the analysis a step further and apply the conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship to the empirical data, while remaining sensitive to the formative context of a societal crisis. From the early discussions of forthcoming vaccines to the process of administering vaccines, there was a notable

change in sentiment and rhetorical practices in the civic discourse, reflecting the unfolding of the pandemic. The pluralism of opinions and expressions on Facebook and Twitter provide both support and contestation of the information about the Covid-19 vaccines as conveyed by the authorities. Comparing the rhetoric, we observe that those who expressed support were rather short in their replies, whereas those contesting the information from authorities often wrote long, emotional comments. Overall, the discourse can be described as vaccine dissensus.

Those who supported the information and the authorities' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic tapped into what it means to be a citizen, and their role as such. Considering that how we talk about civic issues reflects and affects the perception of our role in society (Kock & Villadsen, 2017), the emphasis was on the importance of joining the common effort and working together towards the common good (i.e., get through the pandemic safely and get society functioning again). The notion of the role as citizens is also reflected among those whose rhetoric underlines vaccine scepticism and critique. Those who explicitly contested information from authorities expressed a form of sensed marginalisation and restricted freedom, from which they criticised health authorities. They often expressed mistrust, as well as advocating alternative expertise, with some promoting conspiracy theories. When the tide turned, the dissensus developed into a broader counterforce, and the gate to conspiracy theories was widened rather than narrowed. The rhetoric of hope expressed by health authorities, primarily the minister of health, did not match the experience of the people, which led to frustration.

In understanding the rhetorical practices of authorities on social media, this must be considered in context (Kock & Villadsen, 2017), both in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccine situation, as well as the ongoing civic discourse. During the pandemic management, the health authorities' input was challenged, but proved to be functional while a solution was in sight and hope dominated. In the face of dissensus and people contesting their statements, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health stayed true to its role as fact-provider and patiently answered most questions, whereas the minister of health persistently underlined an inherent norm of Norwegian society to contribute to the common good in his rhetoric. At the same time, he appeared to recognise the shift in sentiment in February–March 2021, whereby his rhetoric became more adamant and less invitational, and he still did not engage in dialogue with those who expressed dissent. The prime minister took a middle road by patiently answering some of those who expressed dissent, but to those who crossed the line of what is deemed appropriate criticism, her answers were quite direct in return.

Furthermore, the normative aspect of rhetorical citizenship draws our attention to whether practical rhetoric privileges or excludes actors, and whether the rhetoric furthers constructive civic interactions or stops the debate (Kock

& Villadsen, 2012). By presenting the vaccines as the only factor that would bring life back to normal, Høie excluded citizens who were sceptical or fearful of vaccines. Although he did not stop the debate, many were left with a sense of exclusion from society. On the other hand, by engaging in the discourse, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health arguably furthered civic interactions and made the debate more informed. From a rhetorical citizenship perspective, the institute, with its presence and by responding to all questions in an inclusive manner on Facebook, empowered citizens with its rhetorical practices.

In sum, the analysed Covid-19 vaccine discourse displays a large degree of dissensus, something we should welcome in a democracy. At the same time, it is important to avoid *unproductive* dissensus. As highlighted by Kock and Villadsen (2017: 574), it concerns the challenge of “communicating politically without an exclusionary aim of total consensus or a reduction of difference to total otherness”. The spread of conspiracy theories arguably distorts the civic discourse and is unproductive for deliberating societal issues. This illuminates the Janus face of social media – as platforms that allow more citizens a say in political discourse, while also easing the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. In the context of the societal crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities persisted in their vaccination policies while facing the balancing act of handling dissensus without disconnecting people from the civic deliberation essential for democracy.

Conclusion

Crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic is a complex issue. The overall picture in Norway is that the Norwegian health authorities enjoy a high level of trust from the population, and that the openness and transparency of the authorities’ crisis communication have been important factors for successful Covid-19 crisis management (Norwegian Government, 2021). Our analysis of Facebook and Twitter provides a complementary view addressing the vaccine discourse on social media.

We set out to investigate the public’s perceptions and responses to the Norwegian health authorities’ handling of the crisis and the communication of public figures on social media. First, there has been a change over time and a shift in moods and arguments, going from scepticism, to optimism, to disappointment and critique. The empirical data show a pluralism of perceptions, where Facebook and Twitter users both support and contest information about Covid-19 vaccines. These perceptions must be understood in the context of a societal crisis, where the rapid development of the vaccines, the prospect of vaccines being the beginning of the end of the pandemic, and the subsequently slow vaccination administration process framed the discourse. Second, the concepts of elite rhetoric and vernacular discourse show how authorities confront

dissensus, as well as sense and attempt to bridge dissensus, during a crisis. The health authorities aim to reach through with what they present as an approach for the common good. This can be understood as a response to the ongoing public discourse and the context of the pandemic.

Our findings bear similarities to previous Nordic studies related to social media during Covid-19 and vaccine attitudes. First, the additional stress of a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic leads to broad societal discourse on social media, including negotiations of what it entails to be a citizen. Second, in a situation marked by uncertainty, established expertise is questioned, and alternative expertise is promoted. Third, vaccine dissent contains similar arguments and expressions of concern across the Nordic countries.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a societal crisis, which is a state of emergency in which dissensus is inherent and characteristic of the dynamics of the crisis. The rhetorical situation is therefore urgent and precarious, and about convincing without creating unproductive, additional dissensus. Thus, although the conceptual framework of rhetorical citizenship is not explicitly aimed at the exceptional circumstances of a stressed society, it has proven useful in understanding the dynamics of how the situation on Facebook and Twitter unfolded.

From our analysis, we observe that the health authorities' rhetorical practices have been effective in many situations, but also that they were fragile to changes during the pandemic. It may therefore be asked whether this signifies a need for a rhetorical strategy that goes beyond rhetorical practice and that considers the situational context. In addition to managing the crisis *per se*, a supplementary objective may be proposed from a rhetorical citizenship perspective, that is, to handle dissensus constructively and to avoid frustrated citizens turning away from the public discourse (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). This resembles the distinction between managing a crisis as an event versus managing a crisis as a process (Williams et al., 2017), however, with the important distinction that in the Covid-19 crisis, the process entailed society as a whole, not solely the authorities. From this perspective, the strategy of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health to be clearly present on Facebook and to provide factual answers to questions from the public and address instances of misinformation by clarifying facts appears to be a productive strategy.

Our research indicates that rhetorical practices are an essential aspect of communication studies on crisis management that deserve to be investigated in other contexts. Furthermore, quantitative analyses supplementing the qualitative content analysis approach used in this study can add to our findings. Further investigations with network analysis may shed light on the exposure potential of Facebook and Twitter posts, to what degree the few actors who are spreading misinformation or conspiracy theories dominate the debate on vaccines, and lastly, whether they operate as an organised network. The degree of intentional spreading of disinformation compared with the more unintentional spreading of misinformation in the context of the vaccine debate could also be examined.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Associate Professor Nancy Eik-Nes at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Senior Researcher Marte Høiby at SINTEF for providing crucial input to various chapter drafts.

The PAR-TS project, from which the analysed data material comes, is led by the University of Oslo and funded by the Research Council of Norway (no. 312731). The data collection is approved by Sikt (ref. 691669), in addition to an approved Data Protection Impact Assessment.

References

- Agergaard, T. E., Smith, M. E., & Nielsen, K. H. (2020). Vaccine assemblages on three HPV vaccine-critical Facebook pages in Denmark from 2012 to 2019. *Media and Communication*, 8(2), 339–352. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2858>
- Breslin, S. D., Blok, A., Enggaard, T. R., Gårdhus, T., & Pedersen, M. A. (2022). “Affective publics”: Performing trust on Danish Twitter during the Covid-19 lockdown. *Current Anthropology*, 63(2), 211–218. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719645>
- Byström, E., Lindstrand, A., Bergström, J., Riesbeck, K., & Roth, A. (2020). Confidence in the national immunization program among parents in Sweden 2016 – A cross-sectional survey. *Vaccine*, 38(22), 3909–3917. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2020.01.078>
- EEAS (European External Action Service). (2021, May 17). *Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the Covid-19 pandemic (update December 2020–April 2021)*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-narratives-and-disinformation-0_en
- Eimhjellen, I. (2018). New forms of civic engagement: Implications of social media on civic engagement and organization in Scandinavia. In L. S. Henriksen, K. Strømsnes, & L. Svedberg (Eds.), *Civic engagement in Scandinavia: Volunteering, informal help and giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (pp. 135–152). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98717-0_6
- European Commission. (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent high level group on fake news and online disinformation*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/739290>
- Faasse, K., Chatman, C. J., & Martin, L. R. (2016). A comparison of language use in pro- and anti-vaccination comments in response to a high profile Facebook post. *Vaccine*, 34(47), 5808–5814. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.09.029>
- Farkas, J., & Neumayer, C. (2020). Disguised propaganda from digital to social media. In J. Hunsinger, M. Allen, & L. Klastrup (Eds.), *Second international handbook of internet research* (pp. 707–723). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1555-1_33
- Glasdam, S., & Stjernswärd, S. (2020). Information about the Covid-19 pandemic – A thematic analysis of different ways of perceiving true and untrue information. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2(1), 100090. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100090>
- Grøtan, T. O., Fiskvik, J., Haro, P. H., Auran, P. G., Mathisen, B. M., Karlsen, G. H., Magin, M., & Brandtzæg, P. B. (2020). *På leting etter utenlandsk informasjonspåvirkning: En analyse av det norske kommunestyre- og fylkestingsvalget 2019* [Tracing foreign influence on elections: An analysis of the local elections in Norway 2019] (SINTEF report 2019:01292). SINTEF. <https://www.sintef.no/publikasjoner/publikasjon/1780464/>
- Hoff-Clausen, E., & Ihlen, Ø. (2015). The rhetorical citizenship of corporations in the digital age. In A. Adi, G. Grigore, & D. Crowther (Eds.), *Corporate social responsibility in the digital age* (pp. 25–45). Emerald Group. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2043-052320150000007027>
- Høie, B. (2020, August 14). *Jeg vet at mange synes det er litt tungt nå. Ferien er over og sommeren går mot slutten. Winter is coming* [I know a lot of people think it's a bit heavy right now. The holidays are over and summer is coming to an end. Winter is coming!] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://m.facebook.com/BentHoie/photos/jeg-vet-at-mange-synes-det-er-litt-tungt-n%C3%A5-ferien-er-over-og-sommeren-g%C3%A5r-mot-s/1463113617214374/>

- Høie, B. (2021a, January 6). *I dag våknet vi til nyheten om rekordhøyt smittetall det siste døgnet. Det var denne utviklingen vi var bekymret for* [Today we woke up to the news of a record high number of infections in the last 24 hours. It was this development that we were concerned about] [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://m.facebook.com/BentHoie/photos/a.146580072201075/1587167261475675/?type=3>
- Høie, B. (2021b, February 24). *Mange av dere har ventet på gode nyheter. I dag har jeg flere! Nå er det satt 400.000 vaksinedoser i Norge* [Many of you have been waiting for good news. Today I have more! 400,000 vaccine doses have now been administered in Norway] [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/BentHoie/photos/a.146580072201075/1622931801232554/?type=3>
- Ihlen, Ø. (Head of Project). (2020, May 20). *Pandemic rhetoric, trust and social media*. Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo. <https://www.hf.uio.no/imk/english/research/projects/pandemic-rhetoric-trust-and-social-media/index.html>
- Ipsos. (2021, April 23). *Ipsos SoMe-tracker Q1'21*. <https://www.ipsos.com/nb-no/ipsos-some-tracker-q121>
- Irwin, R. E. (2020). Misinformation and de-contextualization: International media reporting on Sweden and Covid-19. *Globalization and Health*, 16(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00588-x>
- Kock, C., & Villadsen, L. (2012). Introduction: Citizenship as a rhetorical practice. In C. Kock, & L. Villadsen (Eds.), *Rhetorical citizenship and public deliberation* (Vol. 3) (pp. 1–10). Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Kock, C., & Villadsen, L. (2017). Rhetorical citizenship: Studying the discursive crafting and enactment of citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 21(5), 570–586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2017.1316360>
- Lutz, C., Hoffmann, C., & Meckel, M. (2014). Beyond just politics: A systematic literature review of online participation. *First Monday Peer-Review Journal of the Internet*, 19(7), 1–36. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7>
- Martela, F., Greve, B., Rothstein, B., & Saari, J. (2020). The Nordic exceptionalism: What explains why the Nordic countries are constantly among the happiest in the world. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. D. Sachs, & J.-E. De Neve (Eds.), *World happiness report 2020* (pp. 129–145). Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/>
- NIPH (Norwegian Institute of Public Health). (2020, December 4). *Hvem får tilbud om koronavaksine først, og hvorfor: <https://www.fhi.no/.../anbefaler-a-prioritere.../>* Uavhengig av hvor man havner i vaksinekoen så er det kanskje [Who will be offered the corona vaccine first, and why: <https://www.fhi.no/.../anbefaler-a-prioritere.../>. Regardless of where you end up in the vaccination queue, it might be] [Video] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/folkehelseinstituttet.no/videos/vil-du-vite-mer-om-koronavaksiner/383653216049342/>
- NIPH (Norwegian Institute of Public Health). (2021, January 25). *De fleste sykehjemsbeboere har nå fått vaksine. Grunnen til at disse har stått først i vaksinekoen, er at denne gruppen* [Most nursing home residents have now been vaccinated. The reason why these have been first in the vaccination queue is that this group] [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/folkehelseinstituttet.no/photos/a.427080100692677/3801985586535428/?type=3>
- NIPH (Norwegian Institute of Public Health). (2022). *Folkehelseinstituttets plan for sosiale medier 2022–2023* [The Norwegian Institute of Public Health's plan for social media 2022–2023] [Internal document provided to one of the authors by a NIPH employee during an interview].
- Norwegian Government. (2021). NOU 2021:6. *Myndighetenes håndtering av koronapandemien: Rapport fra Koronakommisjonen* [The authorities' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic: Report by the coronavirus commission]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2021-6/id2844388/>
- Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services. (2012). *Melding til Stortinget: Beredskap mot pandemisk influensa* [Message to the parliament: Preparedness against influenza pandemic]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld-st-16-20122013/id716183/>

- Nurmi, J., & Harman, B. (2020). Why do parents refuse childhood vaccination? Reasons reported in Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 50(4), 490–496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14034948211004323>
- PST (The Norwegian Police Security Service). (2022). *National threat assessment for 2022*. <https://pst.no/alle-artikler/trusselvurderinger/ntv-2022/>
- Pummerer, L., Böhm, R., Lilleholt, L., Winter, K., Zettler, I., & Sassenberg, K. (2020). Conspiracy theories and their societal effects during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 13(1), 49–59. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/19485506211000217>
- Puri, N., Coomes, E. A., Haghbayan, H., & Gunaratne, K. (2020). Social media and vaccine hesitancy: New updates for the era of Covid-19 and globalized infectious diseases. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 16(11), 2586–2593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21645515.2020.1780846>
- Schia, N. N., & Gjesvik, L. (2020). Hacking democracy: Managing influence campaigns and disinformation in the digital age. *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 5(3), 413–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2020.1820060>
- Solberg, E. [@erna_solberg]. (2020, December 27). *Vi venter på første vaksine [We are waiting for the first vaccine]* [Image attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/erna_solberg/status/1343147700922015744
- Stjernswärd, S., Ivert, A.-K., & Glasdam, S. (2021). Perceptions and effects of Covid-19 related information in Denmark and Sweden – A web-based survey about Covid-19 and social media. *Journal of Public Health*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-021-01539-5>
- van Dijck, J., & Alinejad, D. (2020). Social media and trust in scientific expertise: Debating the Covid-19 pandemic in the Netherlands. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120981057>
- Välvirronen, E., Laaksonen, S.-M., Jauho, M., & Jallinoja, P. (2020). Liberalists and data-solutionists: Redefining expertise in Twitter debates on coronavirus in Finland. *Journal of Science Communication*, 19(05), A10. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.19050210>
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2019). *Ten threats to global health in 2019*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2020). *Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV): Situation Report – 13*. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>
- Williams, T. A., Gruber, D. A., Sutcliffe, K. M., Shepherd, D. A., & Zhao, E. Y. (2017). Organizational response to adversity: Fusing crisis management and resilience research streams. *Academy of Management Annals* 2017, 11(2), 733–769. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0134>
- Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. (2017). *Computational propaganda worldwide: Executive summary* (Working paper No. 2017.11). University of Oxford. <https://demtech.oxi.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/computational-propaganda-worldwide-executive-summary/>

The role of journalism in a time of national crisis

Examining criticism and consensus in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic

Mark Blach-Ørsten,^I Anna Maria Jönsson,^{II}
Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir,^{III} & Birgir Guðmundsson^{IV}

^I Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark

^{II} Department of Culture and Education, Södertörn University, Sweden

^{III} Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland

^{IV} School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Akureyri, Iceland

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to examine the conditions for the practice of critical journalism in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden, during the Covid-19 pandemic. We focus on two aspects, one practical and one discursive. First, we focus on journalists' access to relevant information about the pandemic, as access plays a key role in the practice of critical reporting. Second, we focus on metajournalistic discourse, understood as how public debate about journalism shapes the practice of journalism. We found that information access was challenged in all three countries, but in different ways. We also found elements of a metajournalistic discourse. In Denmark, this discourse expressed concern about journalism being too critical, while in Sweden and Iceland, the concern was more a lack of critical reporting. We argue that the differences found can best be explained by the different Covid-19 communication strategies in the three countries.

Keywords: watchdog journalism, metajournalism, information access, communication strategies, democracy

Blach-Ørsten, M., Jönsson, A. M., Jóhannsdóttir, V., & Guðmundsson, B. (2023). The role of journalism in a time of national crisis: Examining criticism and consensus in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 261–282). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-12>

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the conditions for the practice of critical journalism in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic. Traditionally, the Nordics score high when it comes to questions of quality journalism and democracy. In the latest study by The Media for Democracy Monitor research project, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden all land in the top five countries, while the news media in Iceland, for example, face more challenges (Trappel & Tomaz, 2022). In a similarly themed yearly study from Reporters Without Borders (2022a), Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are the top three countries, while Finland comes in at number five, and Iceland at number fifteen. The reason for Iceland's lower position (15 out of 180) is said to be that while journalists in Iceland may enjoy a "legal protective framework as well as a high level of public trust [...] their independence, already weakened by the market's small size, faces threats from the fishing industry, the country's major economic sector" (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b). Thus, while there are clear differences between the Nordic countries, they are all ranked at the favourable end of the democracy scale. Based on the theory of the rally-around-the-flag effect, as well as the so-called policy-media interaction model, we argue that even though the Nordic countries traditionally score high when it comes to questions of journalism and democracy, in times of national crisis – when citizens rally around their governments, the opposition refrains from criticism, and political consensus becomes the order of the day – it can become considerably more challenging for the news media to play the role of critical watchdog (see also Ghersetti et al., Chapter 10). Indeed, studies suggest that in such a political environment, the news media most often fall into line with the political climate and help to support and create political consensus around government policies.

For this reason, the purpose of this chapter is for us to examine the conditions for the practice of critical journalism in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the first part of the Covid-19 pandemic, from March 2020 to December 2021. We do this by focusing on two aspects that influence this practice, one practical and one discursive. First, we focus on journalists' access to relevant information about the pandemic, as access plays a key role in the possibility of practising critical reporting (Zuffova, 2021). While critical watchdog reporting comes in many shapes and sizes, freedom of information, which secures public access to government records, is a vital tool for critical reporting (Zuffova, 2021). Indeed, freedom of information, openness, and transparency are values often associated with the Nordic countries. Jørgensen (2014) found that access to information is, in many ways, still free, open, and transparent in the Nordics, but that there are several differences between Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Denmark, however, stands out as preeminent among the Nordic coun-

tries for “maintain[ing] and even reforc[ing] the secrecy of documents that are important to the political decision-making process” (Jørgensen, 2014: 34).

Second, we focus on the metajournalistic discourse in the news media about the role of journalism during the pandemic. Metajournalism – public debate about journalism – considers journalism as an increasingly central arena for the performance and exercise of political power (Eide & Kunelius, 2018). Studies of metajournalistic discourse focus on how “utterances about journalism shape news practices” (Carlson, 2015a: 350). Metajournalism, which earlier studies occasionally refer to as metacoverage, has focused on journalism’s role during elections (Esser et al., 2001) and in war coverage (Esser, 2009), on what constitutes automated journalism (Carlson, 2015b), on journalism’s relationship with whistle-blowers (Eide & Kunelius, 2018), and on gaming journalism (Perrault & Vos, 2020).

While earlier studies of metacoverage only included journalism about journalism, metajournalism focuses more broadly on public discourse, as it is not only journalists who shape the public discourse about what journalism is or should be. As Carlson (2017) argued, studies of metajournalism allow scholars to take the public discourse about journalism seriously, as it is through this discourse that “meanings of journalism are formed and transformed by actors inside and outside of journalism” (Carlson, 2015: 350). In sum, both practical circumstances, such as information access, and metajournalistic discourses have shaped and influenced the role and performance of critical journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the above, we ask two research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent were journalists in the three countries considered able to access relevant information during the first part of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ2. Are there differences in the metajournalistic discourse in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden as to the role and performance of journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic?

We answer these questions using a combination of texts ranging from news articles to academic research and public reports. While this material was not equally available in all three countries, our findings help shed important light on the challenges that face journalism during a pandemic. Thus, we found that journalists’ access to relevant information was challenged in all three countries, but at different times and in different ways. We also found elements of a metajournalistic discourse challenging and attacking the role of critical and investigative reporting, which was more prominent in Denmark than in Iceland and Sweden, but examples of which were found in all three countries. We conclude the chapter by arguing that the differences found between

Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden can be best explained by the different Covid-19 communication strategies in the three countries. In Denmark, the prime minister took the lead, making Covid-19 communication much more political than in Sweden and Iceland, where health experts took centre stage in communication (for further discussion of the different communication strategies among Nordic governments, see Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3).

Critical reporting in times of crisis and consensus

Previous studies of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as other chapters in this book (see, e.g., Johansson et al., Chapter 13), have focused on the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect (Johansson et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). This effect refers to the fact that in times of crisis, public opinion of political leadership tends to become more favourable, leading to an increased level of trust. Originally, this effect was investigated and discussed in studies of foreign news, wars, and international crises or terrorist attacks (Kritzinger et al., 2021; Lee, 1977).

Kritzinger and colleagues (2021) have offered two explanations: In times of crisis, citizens either turn to political actors whom they feel can protect them from the crisis, or they instinctively try to balance the uncertainty and fear created by a crisis by increasing their trust in politicians and government. However, while many studies have investigated the rally-around-the-flag effect as a question of trust between the government and citizens, Van Aelst (2021) argued that the theory tends to neglect the role of the news media in times of crisis. For instance, Oneal and Bryan (1995: 387) suggested that the access to news media enjoyed by politicians during a crisis increases “their ability to control information and influence public perceptions”, while Besley and Dray (2020) argued that countries with press freedom, and thus a critical press, helped citizens remain better informed about the virus and also made government more accountable.

Nielsen and Lindvall (2021: 1199), in a study of both Denmark and Sweden, found that “in the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the rally-around-the-flag effect was if not stronger then at least more universal in Denmark than in Sweden”. Beakgaard and colleagues (2020), in a study of the Danish case only, found a clear increase in trust in the government following the March 2020 lockdown. And Johansson, Hopmann, and Shehata (2021), in a study of the Swedish case, found an initial strong support of the government that declined over time.

While studies of the rally-around-the-flag effect tend to focus on public opinion, another theoretical approach stemming from the study of wars and crisis, namely the policy–media interaction model (Robinson, 2001), has a

specific focus on the news media's role in wars and crises, building on previous theories of policy-media relations, such as Herman and Chomsky's (1988) manufacturing consent thesis, Hallin's (1984) model emphasising consensus or dissensus, and Bennet's (1990) indexing hypothesis. Thus, the purpose of the policy-media interaction model is to present a nuanced focus on the role of the media, relating this role clearly to the political conditions of a specific crisis. Hence, the model presents three scenarios for media coverage in a time of war and crisis, where each type of media coverage is linked to specific political conditions (Kristensen & Ørsten, 2007):

1. non-influence, where the media merely "manufacture consent" for the official policy (this scenario is most likely in times of political consensus among the elite)
2. limited influence (this scenario is most likely in times of elite dissensus)
3. strong media influence (this scenario is most likely in times of both elite dissensus and policy uncertainty)

Where previous theories on the policy-media effect are rather one-sided and have argued that the news media "followed" the lead of the political elite (Robinson, 2001), Robinson's model argues that this is only one possible scenario. While thus nuancing the relationship between news media and the political elite, the model does not focus on the role of public opinion, despite the fact that some studies also found a clear relationship between the latter and news media's support of government. For example, Christie's (2006) study of the news media's coverage of the Iraq War found that the news media were more inclined to support government policies during times of high public support and more inclined to criticise government policies during times of low public support. In other words, it would seem that both a focus on public opinion (which is the basis of studies of the rally-around-the-flag effect) and a focus on the relationship between the news media and the political elite (which is the focus of the policy-media interaction model) are needed to fully understand the role of the news media during a war, crisis, or pandemic.

To date, the rally-around-the-flag effect has already been the basis of several studies of Covid-19 and public opinion and trust. To this, we add the policy-media interaction model to suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic created a unique environment – of both political (elite) consensus as to ways to handle it, as well as an emotional rally-around-the-flag effect on public opinion – that resulted in a general high trust in and consensus on government policy and political leadership. If we add to this, as Van Alest (2021) has also argued, that a pre-condition for the rally-around-the-flag effect is that the political opposition refrains from criticising the government during a crisis, leaving

the elite dissensus at a minimal (to use Robinson's terminology) then the news media are, at least theoretically, left with just one role to play, according to the policy-media interaction model: creating consensus.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this chapter is explorative, being based on previously published studies and reports and on the analysis of newspaper articles retrieved from national databases. This method varies according to country examined, as the Covid-19 pandemic played out differently in each. In Denmark, few studies have yet considered the news media and the pandemic (but see Baekkeskov et al., 2021, for an exception); thus, articles from the news media play a more significant role here. The analysis concerning Iceland similarly relies on the few relevant studies available and on news articles. In Sweden, a good many studies on the pandemic have already been conducted, so information on the pandemic's development in Sweden is based on studies rather than news reports.

As regards Denmark, the analysis focuses on the first months of the pandemic, namely the period from the first government press conferences announcing the first lockdown on 11 March 2020 to 1 June 2020, when many restrictions were lifted (to be reimposed later that year). First, news articles were collected from the *Infomedia* database, with a focus on the leading national Danish newspapers, using search words such as "journalism coverage", "journalism & Covid-19", "critical press", and so on. Second, the same search was conducted on the homepage of the magazine *Journalisten*, which is published by the Journalist Union. Third, a Google search was made for public reports with a focus on information access or the performance of journalism during a pandemic.

The analysis of Sweden covers the period from 1 January 2020 through 11 October 2021, which means that it includes periods when high numbers were infected and more severe restrictions were imposed, as well as periods in between. Data from news media (press and broadcast media) were collected from the database *Retriever* using search words similar to those used in the Danish study, that is, "*journalism+corona*", "critical media+corona*", "information access+corona", "investigative journalism+corona*", and so on (the same combination of words, replacing corona* with covid*, was also used). Data were also retrieved using Google and the Journalist Union's web page (journalisten.se) with similar search words. The media debate concerning the issues addressed in this chapter was never particularly heated in Sweden during this period, and the analysis also makes much use of public reports and academic research. These data were generally found by using the same search words in Google and Google Scholar (adding "Sweden" and "Swedish").

In Iceland, the analysis was first based on a systematic examination of news items in legacy media (print, broadcasting, and online news media) and public

records. The data were collected through a Google search using similar search words as in the other analyses, that is, “journalism coverage”, “journalism & Covid-19”, “critical press”, “information access”, and so on. Second, the same search words were used to comb through discussions on the Journalist Union’s web page (press.is) and the journal *Blaðamaðurinn* [*The Journalist*]. The first months of the pandemic yielded very little data; therefore, the analysis was extended to cover the period from the onset of the pandemic in late February 2020 until the Omicron wave hit Iceland in early December 2021.

The news texts in the sample in all three countries were then analysed using qualitative textual analysis focusing on both the content of the text and the context of production (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021; Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2020; Carlson, 2015a). According to Bowen (2009), document analysis involves three steps: first, skimming the text; second, reading the text thoroughly; and third, interpreting the text. In this case, a thematic analysis was performed with a predefined focus on how journalism’s role during the pandemic was presented and discussed in the text. The analysis particularly focused on whether the role of journalism during a pandemic was to be critical of the government or to help the government and the public navigate the pandemic.

Analysis

The primary focus of the analysis is the metajournalistic discourse in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden (RQ2). Here, the aim is to uncover the different perceptions of the role of journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic and, more specifically, whether this role is to be critical or supportive of government policies. However, a prerequisite for being able to produce critical journalism at all, if this should be the intention of the news media, is to be able to access the relevant information (RQ1). In times of crisis, this access to information becomes even more important. Thus, before proceeding with our primary analysis, it is necessary to briefly outline how the question of access was affected by the pandemic.

Information access as a prerequisite for critical reporting

In Denmark, the question of information access has been central during most of the pandemic, as journalists have experienced a range of difficulties obtaining the access to which they are entitled by law. In March 2020, for instance, a reporter from a local news outlet was denied access to information by civil servants in Region Zealand. The authorities based their refusal on the fact that the information on the pandemic sought by the reporter might cause fear and panic in the population (Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman, 2020a). The reporter complained to the ombudsman, who, in his decision, found the region to be at fault and underlined the importance of allowing access to information

regarding questions that are important for society. Throughout the pandemic, the ombudsman was actively critical of the Danish authorities for being too slow in allowing access to information or denying access altogether. In July 2020, the ombudsman began to focus on the response time of the Ministry of Health and the health authorities, in particular (Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman, 2020b), due to reporters complaining about prolonged response times. The ombudsman stated in his report that a quick processing of requests to gain information from documents is a prerequisite for the media to be able to keep the public informed, and he underlined that this process simultaneously supports the media in carrying out critical journalism. Despite the ombudsman's focus and many rulings on the subject, response time and information access have been continuing challenges for Danish journalists (Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman, 2021).

In Iceland, research conducted just before the pandemic broke out found that journalists could usually obtain the information they needed, but sometimes they met resistance and had to spend time and effort accessing it (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021). However, information about the pandemic and related issues seems to have been very accessible, and examples of reporters being denied access to information are rare in Iceland. Only two examples can be found where reporters referred a case to the Information Act Ruling Committee, both of which occurred in 2021. In one case, the Ministry of Health denied a reporter access to contracts the state had made with vaccination producers. The ruling committee confirmed the ministry's decisions on the grounds that the requested documents contained information about relations with other states and international institutions, and that it was in the public's interest to keep the information secret (Information Ruling Committee, 2021a). In the other case, the Ministry of Health refused access to the memoranda and legal consultations on which it based the regulation about testing, quarantine, and isolation for those arriving in the country. Before the ruling committee reached a verdict, the Ministry of Health revised its decision, and the requested documents were delivered (Information Ruling Committee, 2021b).

Another example involves the National University Hospital of Iceland (Landspítali), the institution which has dealt with the effects of the pandemic and looked after all of the most serious cases. For the most part, there has been smooth communication between the media and the hospital. However, in August 2021, the hospital's information officer sent out an internal post to roughly 300 medical staff, suggesting that they should not take calls from the media and should, instead, refer questions to him to ensure central management of the information flow. In his e-mail, the information officer provided examples of telephone numbers with certain characteristics that would typically be calls from editorial offices. The best response, the information officer suggested in his letter, was to not answer these calls at all, and he referred to journalists as "little devils" (Kristjánsson, 2021). The matter was swiftly taken up in the news media and

harshly criticised in the editorial columns of the two daily newspapers. The top management of the hospital denied any knowledge of the letter and maintained that the information officer acted on his own accord. The information officer subsequently apologised publicly, stating that there had been no intention to either conceal information from the press or impose censorship, and his sole intention had been to facilitate a more efficient information flow by directing journalists to those members of medical staff with greatest knowledge of the issues being asked about. Furthermore, he declared that through the massive response his letter provoked, he had learned his lesson and reiterated that the hospital had not practised, and would not practise, censorship (Timonen, 2021).

In Sweden, much in line with Jørgensen's (2014) study, access to information during the pandemic has not been a general problem and has been little debated publicly. There are, however, studies showing that there has been a difference in this regard in the experience of national and local journalists. Local journalists have a much closer relationship with their sources and the public, and this seems to be both an advantage and an obstacle for them (Amnér & Fazel, 2021). The advantage is their proximity to information gatekeepers in authorities and other organisations, as well as with citizens, and the main obstacle in relation to receiving information during the pandemic seems to have been authorities' focus on protecting the personal integrity of their citizens. On the other hand, Swedish journalists have also found that representatives of municipalities have been restricting information by arguing that in small municipalities, it is often possible to identify the people concerned, for example, when reports are made on the number of Covid-19 infections in a certain retirement home:

We wanted to report about how the elderly have been harmed by the pandemic, but the investigation changed focus when it became clear that several municipalities and the region were restricting information. Instead, we did a longer investigation of something we didn't plan to be designed that way from the beginning [translated]. (Journalist cited in Amnér & Fazel, 2021: 171)

Journalists participating in a study by Amnér and Fazel (2021) experienced good relations with representatives from the municipalities in the first phase of the pandemic, when journalists mainly delivered information given to them directly by the authorities. In the next phase, however, when journalists took a more investigative approach and started to ask more critical questions, relations soured. Several journalists claimed that there was a lack of transparency on the part of the authorities, and that this caused problems for both the reporting of information and more investigative reporting (Johansson, 2021).

While information access is a key part of public administration in all three countries, our outline above shows that, in all three, the issue of limited information access was addressed at different times during the pandemic.

Debating the role of critical and investigative reporting in times of national crisis

Despite playing out in different ways in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden, the Covid-19 pandemic still presented each of them with a new and exceptional crisis situation for which there was no exact playbook. In Denmark, the politicians, especially the prime minister, took the lead, while the health authorities and experts were at the centre in Iceland and Sweden (see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1; Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3). Hence, the public debate about Covid-19 was more political in Denmark than in Iceland and Sweden, a situation which also affected the news media. Previous studies have already shown how Denmark and Sweden, in particular, differed in their responses to the pandemic. In Denmark, the politicians took control from the beginning and overruled the health authorities by implementing restrictive measures based on an “act fast and with force” strategy (Schnaider et al., 2021). In Iceland, the government’s response mostly mirrored the Swedish approach, with a focus on enabling relevant experts to disseminate important information directly to the public (Ólafsson, 2021a). In Sweden, the response was based more on trust and the ideal of self-governance (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021), using recommendations and trusting citizens’ sense of responsibility instead of regulations. Furthermore, the “face” of the pandemic in Sweden was not a politician but the Public Health Agency and its chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell. Taken together, these different approaches to the pandemic also created different circumstances, including discursively, for the news media.

Between criticism and consensus – the case of Denmark

In Denmark, the first lockdown was announced on 11 March 2020, and in the following months, the role of journalism during the pandemic was frequently discussed by the Danish news media. In May 2020, after two months of intense media coverage, more than 413,000 news stories on Covid-19 were published by Danish news media, according to trade magazine *Journalisten* (Bruun-Hansen & Albrecht, 2020). Søren Brostrøm, the director general of the Danish Health Authority, said in an interview about the media coverage that he thought the press, especially the newspaper *Berlingske*, had spent too much time “looking for hairs in the soup”, meaning that they tried to find problems where, in his opinion, none existed (Bruun-Hansen & Albrecht, 2020). However, going back to the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, it is clear that the news media themselves considered their role in the pandemic in a much broader light.

The regional publishing house Jysk-Fynske Medier (Overgaard, 2020), as well as the business newspaper *Børsen* (Sommer, 2020) and national broadsheet *Politiken* (Schilling, 2020), published pieces debating the critical role of journalism and the importance of helping to stop the spread of the virus by

conveying information given by the health authorities to the public. In slightly different ways, the news media argued that it was both possible and necessary for the newspapers to be critical in their reporting of government and health authorities, while contributing to helping Danish society as a whole battle the pandemic in other parts of their reporting.

For readers and viewers, however, it was often difficult to understand that approach. Thus, the ombudspersons at the public service television stations DR and TV 2 both highlighted viewers' criticism in their yearly and semi-yearly reports covering the start of the pandemic. The DR report stated that right after the lockdown, many viewers and listeners reacted critically to DR's news coverage. In general, they criticised DR for "scaring the public" by asking the prime minister and health authorities critical and irrelevant questions at the public press conferences. One viewer wrote: "Journalists should be critical – not stupid [...] With that kind of reporting, DR is helping to create doubt amongst the public – and that is not needed now" (DR, 2020: 5). In the report on TV 2, the ombudsperson wrote: "The reporters' questions at the government's press conferences have on more than one occasion led to criticism from viewers who found that one should stop practising critical journalism at a time when the nation should stand together" (TV 2, 2020: 2). On social media, ordinary Danes also criticised journalists for asking critical questions at the press conferences (Albrecht & Bruun-Hansen, 2020).

Other contributions from editors and commentators or readers focused more on the need to remain critical in times of crisis. An editorial headline in the tabloid *BT* in April 2020 stated, "Put on the critical glasses" (Rathje, 2020) and argued that, while many voices in the public debate wanted journalism to be less critical and more supportive, it was exactly the right time to be critical towards the decisions taken by the government and health authorities. The same argument was put forward by *Berlingske* (Jensen, 2020) in May 2020 and in *Jyllands-Posten* (Madsen, 2020) in an opinion piece by an employee of the University of Copenhagen.

All in all, these examples of the Danish metajournalistic discourse suggest that reporters and editors were very much aware of the delicate situation of the pandemic and of the need to be both critical and supportive at the same time. Readers, listeners, and viewers spoke out on the need for the news media to tread lightly. However, critical voices were heard from the media themselves as well as from experts and commentators. Brostrøm singled out the centre-right newspaper *Berlingske* in his review of the coverage and found it to be overly critical (Bruun-Hansen & Albrect, 2020). Indeed, many of the calls for criticism seem to be published in newspapers with a centre-right leaning, namely *Berlingske*, *BT*, and *Jyllands-Posten*. This is likely because in Denmark, it was the (Social Democratic centre-left) prime minister who, in many ways, became the face of Covid-19 communication, making that communication more political

than in Iceland and Sweden. Thus, newspapers in Denmark may have treated Covid-19 as a political issue just as much as a health issue.

Despite the public debate and criticism of critical reporting, a survey conducted by journalism researchers later found that the general public believed that the news media had done a good job balancing its coverage of the pandemic (Skovsgaard & Heiselberg, 2020), and trust in Danish news media also rose to an historic high during the pandemic, as did the use of traditional media to obtain information (Schrøder et al., 2021). When looking back on the coverage of 2020 in March 2021, editors stated that the pandemic took them completely by surprise (Friis, 2021). In the article, Jacob Nybroe, chief editor at *Jyllands-Posten*, reflected that at first, the news media were more occupied with finding answers to the worried citizens' many questions than with trying to be critical, but that this changed as the pandemic progressed. Tom Jensen, chief editor of *Berlingske*, remembered that despite an exceptional situation, the press managed to focus critically on the political decisions being taken as well.

Little demand for criticism – the case of Iceland

The first case of Covid-19 in Iceland was confirmed on 28 February 2020, and Covid-19-related stories dominated the news media's output afterwards. The Icelandic media produced 10,506 Covid-19-related stories from 1 January–31 March 2021, and the pandemic was predominantly framed as a health and economic issue (Gylfadóttir et al., 2021). According to Ólafsson (2021a: 242), the Icelandic authorities made “the political decisions early on to allow experts to communicate directly with the public”. Gylfadóttir and colleagues (2021) defined the crisis communication as fitting with Kahn's (2020) model of experts at the forefront when it comes to disseminating information to the media and public. Politicians took a back seat, supporting and endorsing expert advice. The chief epidemiologist, director of health, and director of the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management [Almannavarnadeild ríkislögreglustjóra] were the most prominent voices in the media. As an example, the “trio” featured in one in five of all Covid-19-related stories in February 2020. At the same time, the prime minister was given a voice in fewer than 2 per cent of Covid-19 stories, and the minister of health featured in less than 1 per cent (Gylfadóttir et al., 2021).

The Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management in Iceland has a long tradition of dealing with the press in times of emergencies and natural hazards, such as storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. In such cases, it is protocol to call in scientists to evaluate the situation alongside experts from the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. These experts, in turn, inform the media and public of possible dangers to public safety and explain the forces at work. This tradition of crisis communication – with experts at the forefront (Khan, 2020) – not only creates trust among the public, but also

among the press. Trust in – and use of – the news media did indeed increase (Ohlsson et al., 2021). Thus, investigative and critical reporting was not seen as an issue during the rising waves of the earlier phases of the pandemic in Iceland, although some questions began to be asked in later stages, particularly when the vaccines proved to be not as effective as had been suggested.

According to The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021 (Trappel & Tomaz, 2022), Icelandic journalists agree that there is little room to produce quality in-depth investigative reporting, particularly in the commercial media. Investigative reporting is expensive, many media companies run at a loss, there is no official fund to apply to, and few journalists work at each outlet (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021). Another study concluded that overall, journalists, politicians, and the public regard political coverage as “superficial, lacking in critical questions and investigative work” (Ólafsson, 2021b: 71). As noted above, the overall consensus in Iceland has been that people have trusted the authorities and agreed with the measures taken to deal with the pandemic. The news media have, however, recently been criticised for a lack of critical reporting by people belonging to the small minority that has, for various reasons, objected to vaccinations or restrictions (Hálfðánardóttir & Theodórsson, 2021).

Although these minority voices calling for critical reporting have recently surfaced, it is safe to say that there was little demand from the public or politicians for critical or tough questioning from the press about the handling of the pandemic. On the contrary, evidence suggests that such reporting was widely considered as damaging to the fighting spirit and the unified but difficult struggle of the nation and the heroic health workers against Covid-19.

A striking example of this perspective is given by responses to two interviews in *Kastljós*, a national television news programme on RÚV (see RÚV, 2020), the public broadcasting channel. The interviewees in both cases were top medical managers at the National University Hospital who had just released a report on a mass infection that broke out in October 2020 in Landakot, a hospital unit that primarily dealt with elderly people, where 13 patients died from Covid-19. The report suggested that there were multiple reasons for the mass infection, one of the main ones being where the unit is accommodated, namely in an old hospital (Landspítali, 2020). The reporter repeatedly asked about the responsibility of the hospital and whether the report was some sort of a whitewash, transferring responsibility from the hospital to systemic factors and poor financing of the healthcare system. Both a vocal public and individual politicians reacted strongly against these interviews, and there were news stories and radio programmes summarising angry and outraged posts on different social media and discussions suggesting that the reporter was completely out of order. However, a few suggested that he was simply doing his job. The tone and magnitude of responses to these interviews did not escape the attention of other journalists in Iceland, who were most likely deterred, as there was clearly no demand for critical reporting.

Consensus first – the case of Sweden

The first cases of Covid-19 in Sweden were reported on 31 January 2020, and the virus was the main focus of public debate thereafter. When a pandemic was declared on 11 March, it soon became clear that Sweden had chosen a strategy to cope with Covid-19 that differed from that of the other Nordic countries. Sweden never went into full lockdown, and its strategy involved fewer, and often looser, restrictions than in the neighbouring countries. Combined with a comparatively high level of people becoming infected with and dying from Covid-19, this choice of strategy was widely criticised by other countries and international news media.

Covid-19 has, of course, dominated the news media since 2020, particularly from March, when the pandemic was officially declared. During the period between 1 January 2020 and 11 October 2021, Swedish print media, for example, published 821,727 news items about Covid-19; 103,621 radio and television broadcasts were made; and an Internet search yielded 1,670,426 news reports. The extent of the reporting followed the sickness rate and the different waves of the pandemic, but it peaked in March–May 2020. Ghersetti's (2021) study of how Swedish news media framed the pandemic in February–September 2020 shows, among other things, that the main theme was measures, or lack thereof, imposed by authorities and politicians. This theme, for example, addressed the lack of political leadership and problems with caring for the elderly. From summer 2020, the focus was more directed towards the Swedish strategy. Swedish media reports about Covid-19 had a particular focus on research and researchers but also mainly consisted of journalism with an informative or commenting character, with only 1 per cent of the articles defined as investigative. Compared with other themes, the metadecade about the role of journalism in Sweden must be considered marginal.

The pros and cons of the Swedish strategy were among the core topics of public discourse and the subject of critical voices and perspectives, at least during 2020. News media were initially supportive of this strategy, and few critical questions were raised until mid 2020. During the first part of the pandemic, at least, Swedish journalism was very much in favour of the Swedish strategy, described by an article in *Life Science Sweden* as “Coronanationalism” (Göransson, 2021). During the second wave, November 2020–January 2021, the media took a slightly different and more critical perspective; still, however, there was little regarding responsibility issues in Swedish news media reports, and journalism was characterised by a lack of critical follow-up questions (Bjurwald, 2021).

The role of the news media and the lack of critical and investigative reporting did not really come into focus until October–November 2020. The daily press conferences held for a long time by the Public Health Agency were given a central role in Swedish public discourse regarding Covid-19 and were one of

the main sources for information for journalists and the public. In the wake of the second wave in Sweden (November–December 2020), and especially in April–May 2020, some editors and journalists in Sweden started to criticise the comparative lack of critical questions from Swedish journalists at these Public Health Agency press conferences (Lindström, 2021), and it was pointed out that international journalists posed more critical questions than their Swedish counterparts (Truedson & Johansson, 2021). Lindström (2021) related this lack of critical perspective in the first phases of the pandemic to the policy–media interaction model (Robinson, 2001) and to what he described as the Swedish consensus culture and the relation between the media and the state:

This short communication suggests that a combination of a postmodern view of science, top-down consensus culture and mass media with strong direct (SVT – the state television and Sveriges Radio) and indirect (e.g., daily newspapers) dependence on government for financial survival all plausibly contributed to a comparative lack of scrutiny of the strategy by the mass media in the spring of 2021. (Lindström, 2021: 3)

Another dimension of the lack of critical voices arose from within the media. Media voices were raised early because of the economic pressure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, arguing that due to the economic pressure, there would not be enough resources for investigative journalism. This discussion was, however, only one part of the discourse on the negative economic consequences of the pandemic and, in line with demands for and decisions about public support for different sections of society, requests were made for special state support for news media, which was introduced in 2020 (Ohlsson et al., 2021).

When asked about how the news media performed during the Covid-19 pandemic, Swedish journalists were quite content and satisfied with their work. Some journalists and media confirmed that, in the first phase of the pandemic, they focused on transferring information, providing a service to the public and trying to avoid causing fear (Johansson, 2021). This strategy was also a way of meeting public feeling, which, at the beginning, was critical of journalism and media, questioning, for example, the chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell. When reflecting during late 2021, other media and journalists concluded that they should have been more active and critical during the press conferences (Johansson, 2021).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have focused on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected some of the important conditions for the practice of critical and investigative journalism in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. Based on the rally-around-the-flag effect and

the policy–media interaction model, we argued that a national crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic creates both public support for the government and political consensus among the political elite (including the opposition). This makes it democratically important, but structurally potentially very challenging, for the news media to produce independent and critical coverage. Indeed, studies suggest that news media more often than not support the public and political consensus, rather than challenge it, in times of national crisis. More specifically, we have focused on two research questions: To what extent were journalists able to access relevant information during the first part of the pandemic (RQ1)? And are there differences in the metajournalistic discourse in the three countries as to the role and performance of journalism during a pandemic (RQ2)?

Regarding our first research question, access to the relevant information was clearly an issue in Denmark, where the current ombudsman addressed the issue in a very critical way. In Sweden, access to information was mainly seen as a problem for journalists working in local news media, especially in the latter part of the pandemic, when local journalists began asking more critical questions. In Iceland, access to information played an even more minor role. Thus, the practical circumstances for producing critical journalism were present, if at times challenged, in Denmark particularly.

Regarding our second research question on the metajournalistic debate about the role of journalism during a pandemic, we found little trace of debate in Iceland, but more in Denmark and Sweden. One reason for the limited findings in Iceland may be that the Icelandic media's resources for critical and investigative reporting were limited even before the pandemic, and thus little present as an issue in the public debate. However, one reporter's critical questions were met with severe criticism from both politicians and citizens, suggesting a clear pressure to engage in consensus reporting. In Sweden, some criticism emerged in the metajournalistic discourse regarding the lack of investigative reporting (especially during the first six months of the pandemic), and one issue highlighted was the lack of critical questions from Swedish (national) news media journalists during the daily press conferences.

In Denmark, the metajournalistic discourse about whether news media should produce critical news stories or just stories that “helped” the fight against the virus was manifested in news media articles, letters, comments, and editorials addressing the issue. Moreover, public service stations reported that many viewers and listeners complained that the reporting was too critical. Here, one side argued that news media undermined the government's crisis communication and should instead support government and health authorities in their communicative efforts, while the other side argued that – precisely because it was a time of national crisis – critical reporting was more important than ever, as the government continuously invoked new laws that infringed on traditional forms of civil liberties. This created a difficult space for news media to navigate, in

which editors and reporters reflected and commented while also arguing that the news media could fulfil both roles at the same time.

Viewing our findings through the theoretical lens of the policy–media interaction model, it seems clear that the political and public consensus in both Iceland and Sweden resulted in a limited focus on the need for critical journalism, even though access to information was practically possible in both countries. In Denmark, the political consensus to lock down the country was, to some degree, challenged in the news media and the public debate, as opinion was split among journalists, politicians, and citizens for and against critical journalism. Thus, Danish media users who were sceptical of the more critical coverage clearly articulated the need to “rally” around the government and get through the pandemic “together”, and they considered critical journalism to be in opposition to this view.

Since the political consensus and public opinion were, in many ways, the same in all three countries at the beginning of the pandemic, the main reason for the differences between them is most likely the fact that in Denmark, communication about Covid-19 became political communication, with the prime minister at the centre, not public health communication, with the health authorities at the forefront, as was the case in Iceland and Sweden (cf. Kahn, 2020). Thus, in Denmark, in some ways Covid-19 became part of the daily political journalism and the criticism of a sitting government that always figures strongly in political coverage, especially in the “opposition” press. In Iceland and Sweden, in contrast, the focus was mostly on the health crisis, and the strategies for handling the crisis appear to have created trust among the public and press. As the pandemic went on, however, more questions about the lack of criticism in the press were raised in Sweden. Hence, Denmark and Sweden present contrasting results, with the metajournalistic discourse in Denmark expressing concern about too much critical reporting and in Sweden expressing concern about the lack of it.

Our study naturally has a number of limitations. The Covid-19 pandemic has played out at somewhat different times and in different ways in the three countries, and this has affected both the question of information access and the level and timing of the metajournalistic debate. Future research could focus on interviewing reporters and editors in all three countries about their work and experiences during the pandemic. Future studies might also seek out users who expressed concern about and criticism of journalism during the pandemic and interview them in order to expand our knowledge of their concerns, as such questions will, without doubt, resurface with the next crisis. The practice and meaning of journalism are formed by actors from both inside and outside journalism, as Carlson (2015a) states. While those actors inside journalism have been given plenty of attention, more focus in future studies is needed on those outside.

References

- Albrecht, J., & Bruun-Hansen, K. (2020, May 4). Hvorfor flegner folk over journalister på corona-pressemøderne? [Why are people reacting to journalists at the corona press meetings?] *Journalisten*. <https://journalisten.dk/hvorfor-flegner-folk-over-journalister-paa-corona-pressemøderne/>
- Amné, J., & Fazel, N. (2021). Offentlighet mot personlig integritet under pandemin [The public versus personal integrity during the pandemic]. In U. Andersson, M. Bergman, G. Bohlin, F. Brounéus, P. Dahlgren, E. Ekdahl, M. Gherse, B. Johansson, D. Morton, E. Starke Sundén, A. Widholm, E. Östlund, & L. Truedson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid [Journalism in the age of corona]* (pp. 171–174). Institutet för mediestudier. https://mediestudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Journalistik-i-coronans-tid_sammanslagen_webb.pdf
- Baekgaard, M., Christensen, J., Madsen, J. K., & Mikkelsen, K. S. (2020). Rallying around the flag in times of Covid-19: Societal lockdown and trust in democratic institutions. *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 3(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.30636/jbpa.32.172>
- Baekkeskov, E., Rubin, O., & Öberg, P. (2021). Monotonous or pluralistic public discourse? Reason-giving and dissent in Denmark's and Sweden's early 2020 Covid-19 responses. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1321–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942158>
- Bennett, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state. *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 103–127.
- Besley, T., & Dray, S. (2021). Institutions, trust and responsiveness: Patterns of government and private action during the Covid-19 pandemic. *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1(4), 10. <http://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.30>
- Bjurwald, L. (2021) *Maktens granskare eller maktens megafoner? Svensk journalistik under coronapandemin [Reviewers of power or megaphones of power? Swedish journalism during the corona pandemic]*. Näringslivets medieinstitut.
- Blach-Ørsten, M., Hartley, J. M. & Wittchen, M. B. (2021). Fabrication and erroneous information: Exploring two types of news media scandals as critical incidents in journalism. *Journalistica*, 15(1), 139–164. <https://doi.org/10.7146/journalistica.v15i1.125395>
- Blach-Ørsten, M., & Mayerhöffer, E. (2020). Skal svingdørslobbyisme i danmark reguleres? [Should revolving door lobbyism in Denmark be regulated?]. *Politica: Tidsskrift for Politisk Videnskab*, 52(1), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.7146/politica.v52i1.130794>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Bruun-Hansen, K., & Albrecht, J. (2020, May 4). Corona-generalen om pressens dækning: Man ledte efter håret i suppen [The corona general on the press: They were looking for hairs in the soup]. *Journalisten*. <https://journalisten.dk/corona-generalen-om-pressens-daekning-man-ledte-efter-haaret-i-suppen/>
- Carlson, M. (2015a). Metajournalistic discourse and the meanings of journalism: Definitional control, boundary work, and legitimation. *Communication Theory*, 26(4), 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12088>
- Carlson, M. (2015b). The robotic reporter: Automated journalism and the redefinition of labour, compositional forms, and journalistic authority. *Digital Journalism*, 3(3), 416–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.976412>
- Carlson, M. (2017). Establishing the boundaries of journalism's public mandate. In M. Boersma, & C. Peters (Eds.), *Rethinking journalism again: Societal role and public relevance in a digital age* (pp. 49–63). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315716244>
- Christie, T. B. (2006). Framing rationale the Iraq War: The interaction of public support with mass media and public policy agendas. *International Communication Gazette*, 68(5-6), 519–532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048506068728>
- Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman. (2020a, November 16). *Myndighed kunne ikke tilbageholde oplysninger om Covid-19 beredskab, selv om de kunne skabe utryghed [Authorities cannot withhold information on Covid-19, even though it may cause concern]*. https://www.ombudsmanden.dk/find/nyheder/alle/oplysninger_om_covid_beredskab/#cp-title

- Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman. (2020b). *Covid-19: Ombudsmanden fokuserer på aktindsigt hos sundhedsmyndighederne* [Covid-19: The ombudsman focuses on information access at the health authorities]. https://www.ombudsmanden.dk/find/nyheder/alle/fokus_paa_aktindsigt_hos_sundhedsmyndighederne/
- Danish Parliamentary Ombudsmand. (2021). *Covid-19: Flere og flere venter for længe på aktindsigt hos sundhedsmyndighederne* [Covid-19: More and more wait too long for information access at the health authorities]. https://www.ombudsmanden.dk/find/nyheder/alle/flere_og_flere_venter_for_laenge_paa_aktindsigt_hos_sundhedsmyndighederne/#cp-title
- DR. (2020). *Lytternes og seernes redaktør: Halvårsrapport for først halvår 2020* [The listeners and viewers editor: Semi-yearly report for the first half of 2020]. <https://www.dr.dk/etik-og-rettelser/brugernes-redaktoer>
- Eide, E., & Kunelius, R. (2018). Whistleblowers and journalistic ideals: Surveillance, Snowden and the meta-coverage of journalism. *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, 16(1), 75–95. https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.16.1.75_1
- Esser, F. (2009). Metacoverage of mediated wars: How the press framed the role of the news media and of military news management in the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(5), 709–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764208326519>
- Esser, F., Reinemann, C., & Fan, D. (2001). Spin doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany: Metacommunication about media manipulation. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 6(1), 16–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X01006001003>
- Friis, J. (2021, March 11). Coronas indtog i Danmark: En nyhedshistorie helt uden for kategori [When corona came to Denmark: A news story outside the normal categories]. *Journalisten*. <https://journalisten.dk/en-nyhedshistorie-helt-uden-for-kategori/>
- Ghersetti, M. (2021) Den största nyheten [The biggest news]. In U. Andersson, M. Bergman, G. Bohlin, F. Brounéus, P. Dahlgren, E. Ekdahl, M. Ghersetti, B. Johansson, D. Morton, E. Starke Sundén, A. Widholm, E. Östlund, & L. Truedson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid* [Journalism in the age of corona] (pp. 23–44). Institutet för mediastudier. https://mediastudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Journalistik-i-coronans-tid_sammanslagen_webb.pdf
- Gylfadóttir, A. G., Ólafsdóttir, S. & Ólafsson, J. G. (2021). Framing the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Icelandic media: What were the key concerns and who could raise them? *Icelandic Review of Politics and Administration*, 17(1), 131–152. <https://doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2021.17.1.6>
- Göransson, A. (2022, April 21). “De 22 forskarna fick betala ett högt pris: ‘Stolt att jag hade modet’” [“The 22 researchers had to pay a high price: ‘proud that I had the courage’”]. Life Science Sweden. https://www.lifesciencesweden.se/article/view/787758/de_22_forskarna_fick_betala_ett_hogt_pris_stolt_att_jag_hade_modet
- Hallin, D. C. (1984). The media, the war in Vietnam, and political support: A critique of the thesis of an oppositional media. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), 2–24.
- Hálfðánardóttir, A., & Theodórsson, Á. Þ. (2021, March 5). Fólkið sem vildi ekki Covid-bóluefnin [The people who didn’t want the Covid vaccines]. *The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service*. <https://www.ruv.is/kveikur/folkid-sem-vildi-ekki-sprauturnar/>
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- Information Ruling Committee [Úrskurðarnefnd um upplýsingamál]. (2021a, July 1). 1017/2021: Úrskurður frá 14. júní 2021 [1017/2021: Verdict from 14 June 2021]. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/gogn/urskurdir-og-alit/-stakur-urskurdur/2021/07/01/1017-2021.-Urskurdur-fra-14.-juni-2021/>
- Information Ruling Committee [Úrskurðarnefnd um upplýsingamál]. (2021b, July 20). 1017/2021: Úrskurður frá 14. júní 2021 [1022/2021: Verdict from 28 June 28 2021]. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/gogn/urskurdir-og-alit/-stakur-urskurdur/2021/07/20/1022-2021.-Urskurdur-fra-28.-juni-2021.-/>

- Jensen, T. (2020, May 31). En kritisk offentlighed er den fineste form for samfundssind [A critical public is the best form of community spirit]. *Berlingske*. <https://www.berlingske.dk/kommentatorer/en-kritisk-offentlighed-er-den-fineste-form-for-samfundssind>
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Sweden: Lone hero or stubborn outlier? In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.) *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 155–164). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Johansson, B. (2021). Med beröm godkänt: Journalisternas syn på kriskommunikation och journalistik [Passed with honors: Journalists' view of crisis communication and journalism]. In U. Andersson, M. Bergman, G. Bohlin, F. Brounéus, P. Dahlgren, E. Ekdahl, M. Ghersetti, B. Johansson, D. Morton, E. Starke Sundén, A. Widholm, E. Östlund, & L. Truedson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid [Journalism in the age of corona]* (pp. 106–118). Institutet för mediestudier. https://mediestudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Journalistik-i-coronans-tid_sammanslagen_webb.pdf
- Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: when the Covid-19 pandemic becomes “normalized”. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(sup1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- Jóhannsdóttir, V., Ólafsson, J. G., & Guðmundsson, F. Þ. (2021). Iceland: A small media system facing increasing challenges. In J. Trappel, & T. Tomaz (Eds.), *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How leading news media survive digital transformation* (Vol. 2) (pp. 275–314). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855428-7>
- Jørgensen, O. (2014). *Access to information in the Nordic countries: A comparison of the laws of Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland and international rules*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden.org:diva-3557>
- Khan, L. H. (2020). *Who's in charge? Leadership during epidemics, bioterror attacks, and other public health crises* (2nd ed.). Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Kristensen, N. N., & Ørsten, M. (2007). Danish media at war: The Danish media coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. *Journalism*, 8(3), 323–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907076458>
- Kristjánsson, A. (2021, August 5). Stjórnendur beðnir um að svara ekki fjölmiðlum [Managers are asked not to respond to the media]. *The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service*. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2021/08/05/stjornendur-bednir-um-ad-svara-ekki-fjolmidlum?term=fj%C3%B6lmi%C3%B0lum&rtype=news&slot=2>
- Kritzinger, S., Foucault, M., Lachat, R., Partheymüller, J., Plescia, C., & Brouard, S. (2021). ‘Rally round the flag’: The Covid-19 crisis and trust in the national government. *West European Politics*, 44(5-6), 1205–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1925017>
- Landspítali [National University Hospital of Iceland]. (2020, November 13). *Skýrsla um Covid-19 hópsýkingu á Landspítala Landakoti* [Report on mass infection at Landspítali, Landakoti]. <https://www.landspitali.is/um-landspitala/fjolmidlatorg/frettir/stok-frett/2020/11/13/Skyrslaum-COVID-19-hopsykingu-a-Landspitala-Landakoti/>
- Lee, J. R. (1977). Rallying around the flag: Foreign policy events and presidential popularity. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 7(4), 252–256. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27547364>
- Lindström, M. (2021). The new totalitarians: The Swedish Covid-19 strategy and the implications of consensus culture and media policy for public health. *SSM-Population Health*, 14, 100788. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100788>
- Madsen, K. L. (2020, May 18). Selvfølgelig skal vi stille spørgsmål til regeringen og myndighedernes håndtering af krisen [Of course we should question government and authorities and their handling of the crisis]. *Jyllands-Posten*. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/breve/ECE12148873/selvfoelig-skal-vi-stille-spoergsmaal-til-regeringen-og-myndighedernes-haandtering-af-krisen/>
- Nielsen, J. H., & Lindvall, J. (2021). Trust in government in Sweden and Denmark during the Covid-19 epidemic. *West European Politics*, 44(5-6), 1180–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1909964>
- Ohlsson, J., Blach-Ørsten, M., & Willig, I. (2021). *Covid-19 och de nordiska nyhetsmedierna [Covid-19 and the Nordic news media]*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855473>

- Ólafsson, J. G. (2021a). Iceland: No lockdown and experts at the forefront. In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 239–247). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2021b). Superficial, shallow and reactive: How a small state news media covers politics. *Nordicom Review*, 42(S2), 70–86. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0018>
- Oneal, J. R., & Bryan, A. L. (1995). The rally round the flag effect in US foreign policy crises, 1950–1985. *Political Behavior*, 17(4), 379–401. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01498516>
- Overgaard, M. (2020, March 12). Chefredaktør: Vores journalistik er vigtigere end nogen sinde før [Our journalism is more important than ever before]. *Avisen Danmark*. <https://avisendanmark.dk/artikel/chefredakt%C3%B8r-om-coronakrisen-vores-journalistik-er-vigtigere-end-nogensinde-f%C3%B8r>
- Perreault, G., & Vos, T. (2020). Metajournalistic discourse on the rise of gaming journalism. *New Media & Society*, 22(1), 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819858695>
- Rathje, J. K. (2020, April 5). B.T. mener: På med de kritiske briller [B.T. means: Put on the critical glasses]. *B.T.* <https://www.bt.dk/debat/b.t.-mener-paa-med-de-kritiske-briller>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2022a). *2022 Press freedom index*. <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2022b). *2022 Press freedom index: Iceland*. <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Robinson, P. (2001). Theorizing the influence of media on world politics: Models of media influence on foreign policy. *European Journal of Communication*, 16(4), 523–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323101016004005>
- RÚV. (2020, November 16). “Ég veit ekki í hverju mistökin ættu að vera fólgin” [“I don’t know what the mistake should be”]. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/11/16/eg-veit-ekki-i-hverju-mistokin-aettu-ad-vera-folgin>
- Schraff, D. (2021). Political trust during the Covid-19 pandemic: Rally around the flag or lockdown effects? *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(4), 1007–1017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12425>
- Schilling, B. (2020, March 15). Læsernes redaktør om corona-dækningen: At kunne prutte ’Marseillaisen’ er underholdende, men det har intet med journalistik, at gøre [The readers’ editor on the corona coverage: Being able to fart ’La Marseillaise’ is entertaining, but it has nothing to do with journalism]. *Politiken*. <https://politiken.dk/debat/klummer/art7703340/At-kunne-prutte-%E2%80%99Marseillaisen%E2%80%99-er-ogs%C3%A5-underholdende-men-det-har-intet-at-g%C3%B8re-med-journalistik>
- Schnaider, K., Schiavetto, S., Meier, F., Wasson, B., Allsopp, B. B., & Spikol, D. (2021) Governmental response to the Covid-19 pandemic: A quantitative ethnographic comparison of public health authorities’ communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. *Proceeding of Advances in Quantitative Ethnography: Second International Conference, ICQE 2020, Malibu, California, USA*, 406–421. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67788-6_28
- Schröder, K. C., Blach-Ørsten, M., & Eberholst, M. K. (2021). *Danskernes brug af nyhedsmedier 2021 [The Danes and their media use 2021]*. Centre for News Research, Roskilde University. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5749233>
- Selva, M. (2020). Journalism under fire. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2020*. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2020/journalism-under-fire/>
- Skovsgaard, M., & Heiselberg, L. (2020, April). Magthavernes lydige skødehund eller en konflikt-sulten jagthund? Ifølge danskerne formår pressen at dække coronakrisen balanceret [Obedient lapdog of those in power or a hunting dog hungry for conflict? According to the Danes, the press manages to cover the corona crisis in a balanced way]. *Berlingske Tidende*, 21.
- Sommer, N. (2020, March 13). Ansvarlig journalistik i en svær tid [Responsible journalism in a difficult time]. *Børsen*. <https://borsen.dk/nyheder/opinion/ansvarlig-journalistik-i-en-svaer-tid>
- Timonen, K. M. (2021, August 7). Stefán Hrafn biðst afsökunar á bréfinu [Stefán Hrafn apologises for the letter]. *The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service*. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2021/08/07/stefan-hrafn-bidst-afsokunar-a-brefinu>
- Trappel, J., & Tomaz, T. (Eds.). (2022). *Success and failure in news media performance: Comparative analysis in the media for democracy monitor 2021*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855589>

- Truedson, L., & Johansson, B. (2021). Klarade journalistiken att bevaka coronapandemin? [Did journalism manage to cover the corona pandemic?] In U. Andersson, M. Bergman, G. Bohlin, F. Brounéus, P. Dahlgren, E. Ekdahl, M. Ghersetti, B. Johansson, D. Morton, E. Starke Sundén, A. Widholm, E. Östlund, & L. Truedson (Eds.), *Journalistik i coronans tid [Journalism in the age of corona]* (pp. 8–22). Institutet för mediestudier. https://mediestudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Journalistik-i-coronans-tid_sammanslagen_webb.pdf
- TV 2. (2020). *Seernes redaktör: Beretning for perioden 1. januar–31. december 2020 [The viewers' editor: Report for the period 1 January–31 December 2020]*. <https://sr.tv2.dk/>
- Van Aelst, P. (2021). Covid-19 as an ideal case for a rally-around-the-flag? How government communication, media coverage and a polarized public sphere determine leadership approvals in times of crisis. In P. Van Aelst, & J. G. Blumler (Eds.), *Political communication in the time of coronavirus* (pp. 1–13). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170051>
- Žuffová, M. (2021). Fit for purpose? Exploring the role of freedom of information laws and their application for watchdog journalism. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 300–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211006702>

Section IV

Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies

Rallies around the Nordic flags during the Covid-19 pandemic

Bengt Johansson,^I Jacob Sohlberg,^{II} & Peter Esaiasson^{II}

^IDepartment of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

^{II}Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

The so-called rally-around-the-flag effect, more succinctly known as the rally effect, has been prominently discussed in both academic and public discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rally effect entails spikes in support for and trust in political leaders, governments, and state agencies during a crisis. This chapter assesses the validity of this theory in the Nordics during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. By studying people's support for the government, institutional trust, and belief in the government's strategy, we identify a wide range of evident rally effects that occurred toward the beginning of the first wave of Covid-19, creating opportunities for successful instances of crisis communication. Overall, our results show similar basic patterns in the relationship between the citizens and the state across the Nordic countries, despite the different pandemic strategies adopted among them.

Keywords: rally effects, trust, crisis communication, crisis management, Nordic countries

Introduction

One of the most pronounced effects of the Covid-19 crisis was the early spike in support for and trust in governments and state agencies – the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect (Bol et al., 2021; De Vries et al., 2020; Van Aelst, 2021).

Johansson, B., Sohlberg, J., & Esaiasson, P. (2023). Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies: Rallies around the Nordic flags during the Covid-19 pandemic. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 285–301). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-13>

The concept of the rally effect was introduced in Mueller's (1973) research on American foreign policies based on the observed spike in support for sitting presidents during international conflicts (Mueller, 1973); however, research suggests that this phenomenon is evident amid other types of crises as well (Dinesen & Jæger, 2013; Woods, 2011). Furthermore, the rally effect often extends past heads of state to include state agencies and government strategies. For example, various government agencies garnered significant increases in trust during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic (Esaiaasson et al., 2021; Ihlen et al., 2022).

Of course, while they may comprise substantial increases in support, rally effects are not permanent. Previous research indicates that early rises in support tend to ultimately result in similarly rapid declines after the most critical phase of the crisis has passed (Mueller, 1973). While there are some examples of long-lasting rally effects, they generally fade away (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003); in fact, rally effects can be thought of as "perturbation effects", as attitudes ultimately return to their pre-crisis baseline figures (Sniderman et al., 2019). There are several potential explanations for why this type of rise in support is temporary, with eventual evaluations of crisis-management performance being one of the most prominent (Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2021; Van Aelst, 2021).

Rally effects can have a direct impact on crisis management, as institutional trust strongly influences the behaviour – and, in turn, the cooperation – of ordinary citizens (Christiansen & Lagreid, 2005; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). In the Nordics, however, which already exhibit high levels of institutional trust, rally effects may play a more limited role. This makes for an interesting dynamic, as Sweden, in particular, relied heavily on citizens' trust when implementing measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, one may expect there to be relatively weak rally effects in Sweden, on account of a potential "ceiling" on citizens' trust in the government. Such dynamics would make the Nordics a "least likely case" for experiencing rally effects. However, one could also argue that the Nordic countries would boast strong rally effects, as countries with low levels of institutional trust and high levels of political polarisation typically exhibit less prominent rally effects (Van Aelst, 2021). In this sense, the Nordics could even represent a "most likely case" for rally effects.

Against this backdrop, we aim to investigate the rally effect in the Nordics during two years of the Covid-19 pandemic: 2020–2021. Our overall aim is to investigate whether the rally effect – if detected – exhibited similar dynamics across the Nordic countries despite the governments adopting different pandemic strategies. Notably, the Swedish case constitutes somewhat of an outlier in terms of both adopted strategy and number of deaths (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Accordingly, we pose three empirical research questions related to the rally effect during Covid-19. The first two address all of the Nordic countries:

RQ1. Are rally effects observable across the Nordic countries in terms of citizen support for governing parties?

RQ2. Are rally effects observable across the Nordic countries in terms of citizens' support of their government's crisis-management approach?

To answer these questions, we consider public opinion data from academic surveys and commercial opinion polls. The third research question looks specifically at Sweden to detect whether the rally effects are uniform or if citizens make different evaluations depending on the state agencies' responsibility for handling the crisis.

RQ3. Are rally effects observable in terms of citizens' perceptions of state agencies not directly involved in crisis management?

To answer this question, we rely on data from an original Swedish panel survey with five waves collected between February 2020 and May 2021.

Trust, performance, and crisis management

Actions taken based on trust entail a leap of faith – the belief that the target of our trust will cooperate and live up to our expectations in the spirit of benevolence. In general, trust is a mechanism that serves to reduce complexity, as we cannot investigate and control all of our interactions with others. Trusting others – at least to a reasonable extent – makes our lives easier (Delhey et al., 2021; Luhman 1979). Trust is particularly important in situations that are difficult to understand – where knowledge is limited, and consequences are difficult to predict (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Thus, trust constitutes a shortcut in decision-making, especially in high-stake scenarios (Earle, 2010; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014).

Previous research emphasises the connection between institutional trust and citizens' compliance with protective measures. However, this trust–compliance relationship is partially dependent on how responsible organisations manage to handle the crisis and the effectiveness with which they communicate their decisions. Thus, institutional trust (i.e., trust in the government and state agencies) is often viewed as a critical aspect of crisis management (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005; Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2003). Lack of trust may impact risk perceptions, hindering citizens' willingness or ability to mitigate risks (Devine et al., 2020; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014; Van der Weerd et al., 2011). Results from studies on health communication during previous pandemics – such as the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2016 (Blair et al., 2017; Morse et al., 2016), the SARS pandemic, avian influenza, and the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014) – confirm that respondents with high government trust are more

inclined to take precautionary actions to mitigate their personal risk and the spread of the disease. Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, research indicates that trust is conducive to compliance with government recommendations (Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2021), though there are exceptions (Ling Wong & Jensen, 2020). Studies from the early phases of the pandemic show that high trust in government institutions is associated with a willingness to adopt protective measures like social distancing, handwashing, testing, and wearing face masks (Devine et al., 2020). Furthermore, high trust is linked to a higher chance of obeying regulations and recommendations (Han et al., 2021; Olsen & Hjorth, 2020), lower mortality rates (Oksanen et al., 2020), and a greater intention to get vaccinated (Parsons Leigh et al., 2020).

Researchers argue that institutional trust partially depends on how citizens evaluate responsible institutions' ability to provide certain outputs (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Van Aelst, 2021). Therefore, the literature on crisis management and crisis communication often emphasises the importance of both management and communication efforts to ensure the maintenance of organisational reputation (Benoit, 2015). Various fields of risk and crisis communication research use trust or similar concepts to analyse how stakeholders (e.g., citizens, shareholders, and interest groups) evaluate the actors responsible for managing and communicating a crisis (Coombs, 2009). From a crisis-management perspective, trust constitutes an essential factor in effective political and administrative leadership (Boin et al., 2016; Györfy, 2018), while public distrust can delegitimise institutions' crisis-management strategies (Liang & Christensen, 2019). In fact, leaders and organisations entering a crisis with low trust or credibility often struggle to effectively handle the crisis (Boin et al., 2016); evidently, pre-crisis reputation shapes post-crisis assessments of institutions' managerial effectiveness (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Kim, 2017).

The rally effect: Explanations for rising and declining support

Even if the opinion phenomenon behind the rally-around-the-flag effect is well documented, researchers have yet to come to a consensus on why this effect exists. Hetherington and Nelson (2003) framed the literature as split into two schools of thought: "the patriotism school" and "the opinion leader school". The former focuses on various socio-psychological mechanisms, with one such mechanism entailing external threats triggering support for unifying symbols (Doty et al., 1991). Alternatively, some assert that increased feelings of insecurity prompt people to unify around entities that feel familiar and secure (Delhey et al., 2021). Additionally, there is some evidence that negative feelings, such as anger and anxiety, actively drive the rally effect (Lambert et al., 2011). The latter, in contrast, focuses on perceptions of societal problems and the ways in

which they are communicated. Politicians often set aside ideological differences during a crisis, and leaders tend to receive more attention. Thus, rising support can be explained by increased media attention paired with a lack of public criticism (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Hetherington and Nelson (2003) suggested that the patriotism school is more accurate in explaining the rise of the rally effect, while the opinion leader school more effectively explains the duration of the effect and its eventual decline. Studies on the rally effect during the Covid-19 pandemic have looked at both initial spikes in support and their eventual decline. Comparing rally effects in different countries, Van Aelst (2021) has concluded that there are both long- and short-term effects, depending, in part, on the country. There are also some examples of a “negative” rally effect, with support for political leaders decreasing during the early phases of the pandemic.

Such comparative approaches typically discuss the rally effect during the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of the opinion leader school, highlighting how perceptions of performance can, in a broad sense, explain rally effects (Van Aelst, 2021). In a study comparing 35 countries, Herrera and colleagues (2020) showed leadership approval to be negatively correlated with the number of infections. Overall, these studies suggest that citizens support their leaders when they are successful in protecting public health. This makes the Nordic experience interesting, as the rally effect was similar across the Nordics, despite the death toll in Sweden being a dramatic outlier (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1).

Of course, death toll is not the only important factor. Perceptions of effective crisis management also appear to influence public approval of leaders. Transparency (i.e., not lying about or downplaying the infection), visibility, and alignment with scientific experts can aid political leaders in gaining public support (see Rasmussen et al., Chapter 4), while high death rates, blatant mismanagement, and poor communication strategies can all hinder public support (Van Aelst, 2021).

Of course, perceptions of success or failure are driven by contextual factors, such as media coverage, personal media consumption, and predispositions. One comparative study of news coverage showed that the level of polarisation in news media is negatively correlated with the rally effect. Thus, countries with a more polarised media landscape tend to have weaker rally effects (Cardenal et al., 2021).

Studies on the declining phase of the rally effect have highlighted managerial performance – alongside political ideology – as an important driving factor behind the decline (Johansson, Hopmann et al., 2021). This study and previous studies have also pointed out a uniform – both from different levels – rally effect related to political ideology (Esaïasson et al., 2021), even if other studies have pointed out increased cleavages (Van Aelst, 2021).

In summary, the rally effect was clearly visible around the globe during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. The strength and duration of the effect

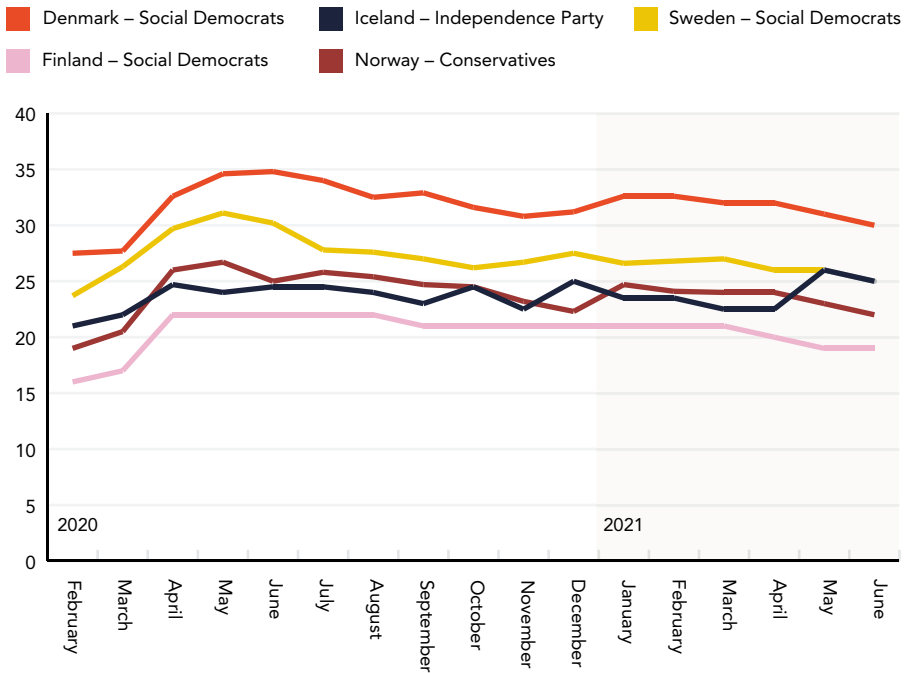
varied based on governments' managerial effectiveness and citizens' perceptions of their government's efforts. Previous studies have provided evidence of rally effects in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic, with rises in support for both the leading party and the state agencies responsible for managing the crisis (Ihlen et al., 2022). Furthermore, research points to a general rise in trust in government agencies during the first wave of the pandemic (Esaiasson et al., 2021). However, there is a lack of research on the scope of the rally effect and the degree to which managerial effectiveness influenced the rally effect in the Nordic countries specifically. The remainder of this chapter fills that gap in the literature.

Rally effects in the Nordic countries

This section aims to trace changes in support for leaders, state agencies, and their adopted strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the Nordic countries. To achieve this, we have collected open-source data from private opinion pollsters, government agencies, and academic research (see Figures 13.1 & 13.2). There is a notable lack of comprehensive, comparable data on these matters across all of the Nordic countries. The only metric that was universally available was opinion polls on political parties. However, we sought to use different sources to construct a brief overview of general trends in support and institutional trust.

Figure 13.1 illustrates government support during the Covid-19 pandemic by using support for its leading party as a proxy. All of the Nordic countries had coalition governments in 2020 and 2021 except Denmark, where the Social Democrats led a minority government. Social Democrats also constituted the biggest parties in Finland and Sweden, holding the prime minister position in coalition governments. Høyre (Conservative) was the dominant party in Norway's coalition government, with its party leader also serving as prime minister until September 2021. A coalition government governed Iceland with a Green Party prime minister until the general election in September 2021. However, while the prime minister was from the Green Party, we chose the largest party in government (the Independence Party) as the proxy for government support.

Figure 13.1 Support for the leading government party in the Nordics, February 2020–June 2021 (per cent)



Source: Politico, n.d.

Figure 13.1 shows a clear increase in support (4–8 percentage points) for the leading government parties across all five of the Nordic countries from February to April 2020. This increase is apparent regardless of how the pandemic affected the given country in terms of infected and death counts (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Following the initial spike, leading parties experienced a slight drop in the polls, though this was most evident in the cases of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

There are several points worth mentioning here. First, this universal rise in support strengthens the idea that a rally effect took place during the first months of the pandemic across the Nordics. Second, there was a decline in leading party support after the initial spike, supporting the general theory of rally effects. Notably, the magnitude of the polling drop appears to be correlated with the impact of Covid-19 in each country in terms of death count. The largest drop of support was faced by the Swedish Social Democrats. As Sweden experienced the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 – in the context of the Nordic countries – public discourse and criticism from opposition parties in the country became far harsher than it did in the other Nordic countries by June

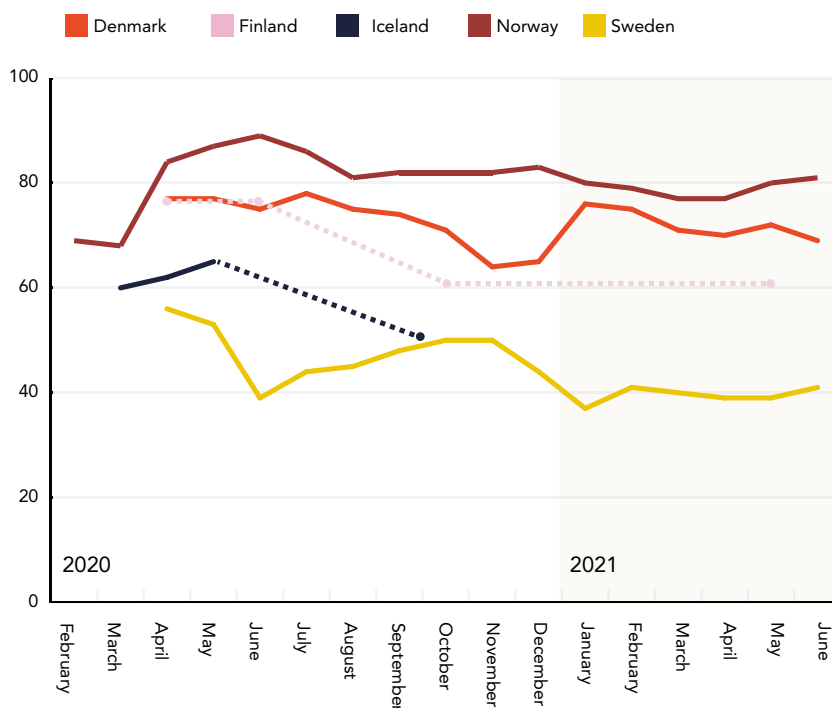
2020 (Johansson, Hopmann et al., 2021; Johansson & Vigsø, 2021). In sharp contrast to the Swedish Social Democrats, the Independence Party in Iceland saw no apparent decline in support following its initial spike.

There are less-clear fluctuations in support amid the second and third waves of Covid-19. There was a slight increase in support for leading government parties in December 2020 across the Nordics, aside from Finland, and this could constitute a weak second rally effect. Regardless, however, it should be noted that government support was at least marginally higher in June 2021 than it was prior to the pandemic.

Next, we consider citizens' perceptions of their government's performance, though this requires reliance on less comparable data. The HOPE Project (Aarhus University, n.d.) uses the same phrasing in a prompt aimed at both Denmark and Sweden: "the policy is necessary". In Norway, we have data from a question about people's trust in state agencies' crisis-management health strategies. Iceland has a Covid-tracker tool that follows public opinions on various topics, with one question asking about trust in the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management's [Almannavarnadeild ríkislögreglustjóra] (www.almannavarnir.is/english/) handling of Covid-19. However, this question was only posed during the first three months of the pandemic in 2020 and as a follow-up question in August 2020. For Finland, the closest data stems from a question about citizens' general trust in the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos] (<http://www.thl.fi/en>), collected by the Finnish Citizen Panel (Väliweronen & Jallinoja, 2021). Of course, these data are not comparable in a straightforward or ideal sense. However, this analysis aims to identify broad trends in rally effects, meaning that we can use these varied data points as proxies for public perceptions of how the Covid-19 pandemic was handled.

Figure 13.2 is less interpretatively intuitive than Figure 13.1 in terms of both data type and data availability. For example, we only have a few data points illustrated for Finland and Iceland. Still, there are signs of rally effects – especially in Norway and Iceland. If we consider data from other sources, there is a clear increase in support for the Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] (www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se) between March and April 2020 (Novus, 2022). The data in the figure does not completely capture the initial rally effect in Denmark and Sweden, as the only data available is from April 2020; however, data on trust in the Public Health Agency of Sweden from other sources indicate a similar decline in support (Kantar Sifo, n.d.).

Figure 13.2 *Trust in and support for the strategy of responsible government agencies in the Nordics, March 2020–June 2021 (per cent)*



Comments: Denmark reflects evaluation of the government response; Iceland, support for the government Covid-19 response; Norway, trust in health agencies' management of Covid-19; Sweden, evaluation of the government response; and Finland, trust in the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The dotted lines indicate missing data points from month to month.

Source: Denmark and Sweden (Arhus University, n.d.); Iceland (Social Science Research Institute, n.d.); Finland (Väliveronen & Jallinoja, 2021); Norway (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2022)

Thus, in addition to the changes being less obvious here, the only significant changes are the decline in support for the Swedish policy and the increase in support for the Danish policy during the second wave from November 2020 to January 2021. However, what should be noted in the Danish case is the steep drop in trust from October to November 2020, likely stemming from the “mink scandal”, where the legality of the cull of the country’s more than 15 million minks was criticised and debated.

Also worth noting is the generally lower levels of support for the policy in Sweden than the one in Denmark, which indicate that exogenous factors (e.g., death toll) and performance are key factors in public perceptions of crisis-management performance in the Nordics. This being said, one may have expected greater differences between the two countries (or, more generally,

between Sweden and all of its Nordic neighbours) in terms of public perceptions, given Sweden's unique strategy and far higher death toll (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Still, even if public support for the specific Covid-19 policy that Sweden adopted was lower than in other Nordic countries, support for the Public Health Agency seems to have been about the same in June 2021 as it was at the beginning of the pandemic (Ihlen et al., 2022).

The dynamics of institutional trust and the role of performance

To achieve a better understanding of the rally effect even in peculiar contexts, this section focuses on the Swedish case. Since Sweden has a clear division between government and government agencies, public trust in the government can be compared with public trust in individual institutions.

Survey data were collected before and during the Covid-19 pandemic on five occasions from the same individuals. The respondents belong to the Citizen Panel, which contains around 75,000 people and is maintained by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (University of Gothenburg, n.d.). Our conclusions are based on two samples: One sample comprises 3,865 opt-in respondents, all of whom answered across all five survey waves, and the other is representative of the general Swedish population in terms of education, gender, and age. Of the representative sample, 572 individuals responded across all five survey waves. As there are no substantive differences in results between the larger opt-in sample and the smaller representative sample, this section simply focuses on the larger sample.

One advantage of panel data is that, since we are following the same individuals, we can be certain that changes over time are not driven by sampling issues, which can be troublesome in aggregated cross-sectional data.

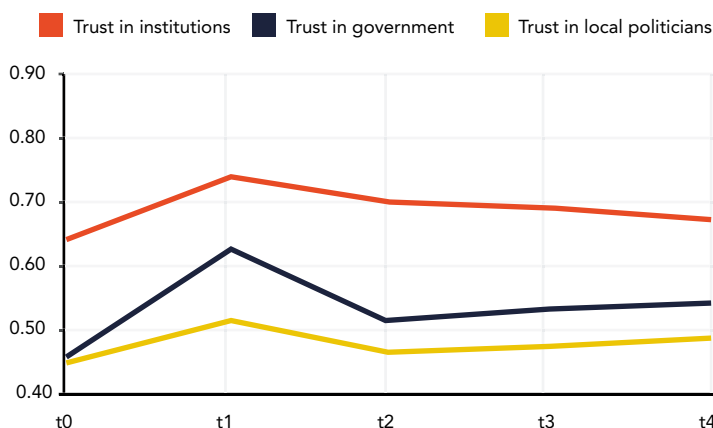
Our first survey (t_0) was conducted 24 February–19 March 2020. We view this as our “pre-pandemic” wave, though it is important to note that the spread of Covid-19 was already underway at this point, with the World Health Organization formally declaring the spread a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Only a small minority (2%) of our sample was initially interviewed after this date. There is no evidence that this portion of respondents significantly influenced our results. Importantly, since we collected data from the representative sample on institutional trust from December 2018 to January 2019 (roughly a year before our t_0 survey), we can assess the presence of a rally effect at t_0 ; as reported elsewhere, we find no such evidence (Esaiasson et al., 2021). In other words, we are fairly certain that we can deem the t_0 survey to be a reasonable baseline. We conducted subsequent surveys 31 March–14 April 2020 (t_1), 15 September–26 October 2020 (t_2), 3 December 2020–4 January 2021 (t_3), and

29 April–25 May 2021 (t_4). The entire period covers well over a year, from early 2020 to mid 2021, during which time fatalities in Sweden due to Covid-19 were low (t_0), high (t_1), low (t_2), very high (t_3), and low (t_4).

Below, we present the results of five survey questions. One measured government trust: “How much trust do you have in the way the government is doing its job?” One measured trust in local politicians: “How much trust do you have in the way municipal politicians are doing their jobs?” One measured trust in institutions: “Generally speaking, how much trust do you have in Swedish government agencies?” One measured trust in the police: “More specifically, how much trust do you have in the way the police are doing their jobs?” Finally, one measured trust in healthcare providers: “More specifically, how much trust do you have in the way healthcare providers are doing their jobs?” Respondents could answer these questions with one of five responses: “Very high trust”, “Rather high trust”, “Neither high nor low trust”, “Rather low trust”, or “Very low trust”.

Figure 13.3 shows several interesting results regarding trust in politicians and institutions. First, there was a large increase in trust in government during the early phases of the pandemic, echoing the findings shown in Figure 13.1. Second, there was a notable rally effect for local politicians, though it was less dramatic than that for national leaders. Moreover, institutional trust exhibits a similar trend, though its decline was more quickly cemented. Still, it showed a clear return to the baseline – in line with government trust. Overall, on these three general objects of trust, the rally effect aligns with previously established trends.

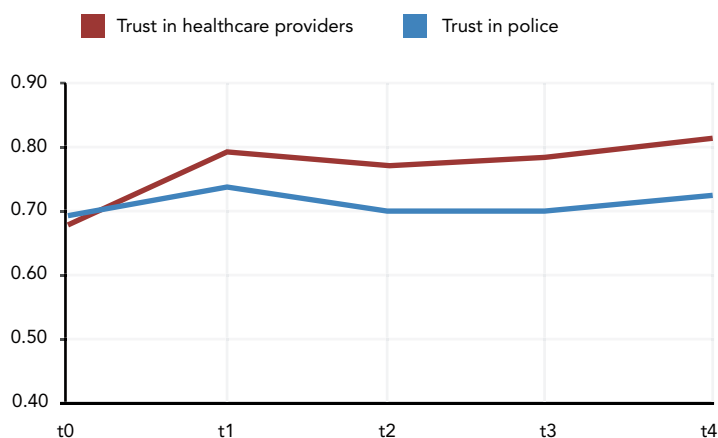
Figure 13.3 *Trust in institutions, the government, and local politicians in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic*



Comments: Responses have been normalised to range from 0 to 1. Higher values are associated with higher levels of trust. $N = 3,865$. $t_0 = 24$ February–19 March 2020; $t_1 = 31$ 14 March–April 2020; $t_2 = 15$ September–26 October 2020; $t_3 = 3$ December 2020–4 January 2021; $t_4 = 29$ April–25 May 2021.

Next, we look at the potential rally effect pertaining to two specific institutions: the Swedish police and the Swedish healthcare sector. The Swedish police played only a marginal role in the government's Covid-19 response; yet, despite this limited role, they experienced a notable boost in trust. Healthcare providers, who were directly involved in the government's response, experienced an initial increase in support of the same magnitude as that experienced by the government as a whole. Evidently, this early boost extends to nearly all prominent state agencies – not just those involved in the crisis-management strategy.

Figure 13.4 *Trust in healthcare providers and police in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic*



Comments: Responses have been normalised to range from 0 to 1. Higher values are associated with higher levels of trust. $N = 3,865$. $t_0 = 24$ February–19 March 2020; $t_1 = 31$ March–14 April 2020; $t_2 = 15$ September–26 October 2020; $t_3 = 3$ December 2020–4 January 2021; $t_4 = 29$ April–25 May 2021.

However, the most noteworthy finding, as seen in Figure 13.4, may be what happened after the initial increase. By t_2 , in September–October 2020, trust in politicians and police had receded to pre-pandemic baseline levels – but trust in healthcare providers remained at the t_1 level. Remarkably, trust in them continued to increase throughout the pandemic – ultimately rising even higher than it did following the initial rally effect. While there are many possible interpretations of this dynamic, one is that citizens selectively updated their trust in this specific institution. After all, medical professionals and hospital staff had worked tirelessly for a long period of time; while many lives were lost, healthcare providers successfully protected the public from a far worse outcome – perhaps the public took notice. If so, the conclusion by Sniderman and colleagues (2019) that rally effects are universally fleeting may need to be qualified: If an institution is directly involved in handling the cause of the

rally effect and performs well, it may result in a relatively long-term increase in trust. Before the pandemic, at t_0 , levels of trust in healthcare providers and the police were essentially identical; after the pandemic, at t_4 , there is a clear gap in trust between them.

Conclusions

In the introduction of this chapter, we presented two reasonable outcomes of rally effects in the Nordics during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first one claimed these countries should be a “least likely case” for rally effects, and if there were any, that they would be rather weak since the institutional trust is so high to begin with. The argument for the second one – there being strong rally effects – was based on high institutional trust and low levels of political polarisation in the Nordic countries, which made them a “most likely case” for rally effects. Our results clearly support the second claim, with documented existence of rally effects across all of the Nordic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. These surges in support were broad, encompassing the government, state agencies responsible for handling the pandemic, as well as state agencies with no direct role in handling the crisis. These results answer our three research questions, suggesting that the beginning of the pandemic constituted an opportunity for authorities to garner support from citizens to handle the critical situation. Despite institutional trust already being high in the Nordics, the rally effect made people’s support for the government and trust in its strategies even stronger during the early phases of the pandemic. However, rally effects are generally short-lived, and these were no exception, with support indicators returning to pre-crisis levels within a few months. Given how the Nordic countries all adopted significantly different approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Ihlen et al., 2022), government actions appear to have had little impact on citizens’ reactions, especially during the early stages of the crisis.

Our study presents four main takeaways. The first is that rally effects can be observable in countries that generally exhibit high institutional trust and low rates of political polarisation. Therefore, rally effects provide governments and state agencies with favourable conditions in which to conduct effective crisis management, even in those that already exist amid favourable, high-trust dynamics (Cornia et al., 2016).

Second, national differences in crisis-management strategies have little influence on the presence of a rally effect. Sweden, which adopted a highly criticised Covid-19 strategy and faced high death tolls during the first year of the pandemic, encountered a rally effect in line with those of its neighbours. While there were certainly differences in intensity that could be attributed to citizens’ evaluations of their government, these differences are minor, especially given that all of the countries witnessed a sort of regression to the pre-pandemic baseline.

Third, when analysing the rally effect of Swedish agencies with different levels of responsibility for crisis management, data shows a broad scope of the rally effect, with rising support levels (and eventual declines) extending to state agencies that played no role in crisis management. For example, Swedish police briefly enjoyed rising trust levels despite not playing a direct role in crisis management. Rally-around-the-flag effects extend throughout the whole of society, with threats from the outside world triggering unifying symbols of familiarity and security; all state agencies, regardless of their specific roles, seem to function as such symbols (Esaiaasson et al., 2021).

Fourth, there is an important exception to the rule of short-term rally effects. Healthcare was the only government agency that enjoyed a lasting and nearly continuous rise in trust among Swedish citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the importance of hard-working staff being rewarded with public support, this finding is theoretically relevant in at least two ways: 1) it shows that rapid increases in support have the potential to result in a lasting shift in dynamics; and 2) the healthcare sector in Sweden has the potential to act as a key player in crisis management and still come out stronger.

These four takeaways demonstrate the importance of the rally effect. The case of the Nordic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that crisis managers, politicians, journalists, and citizens must all consider the rally effect – and its likelihood, especially in the Nordics – when forming policies or opinions during a crisis.

Acknowledgements

The chapter is a part of the research project Crisis Communication and Public Trust in a Multi-Public Society (KRISAMS), funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (grant no. 2017-2860).

References

- Aarhus University. (n.d.). Hope project – How democracies cope with Covid19: A data-driven approach. <https://hope-project.dk>
- Baker, W. D., & Oneal, J. R. (2001). Patriotism or opinion leadership? The nature and origins of the “rally ‘round the flag” effect. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45(5), 661–687. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3176318>
- Benoit, W. L. (2015). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: Image repair theory and research* (2nd ed.). State University of New York Press.
- Blair, R. A., Morse, B. S., & Tsai, L. L. (2017). Public health and public trust: Survey evidence from the Ebola virus disease epidemic in Liberia. *Social Science & Medicine*, 172, 89–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.11.016>
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Bol, D., Giani, M., Blais, A., & Loewen, P. J. (2021). The effect of Covid-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy? *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(2), 497–505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12401>
- Bouckaert, G., & van de Walle, S. (2003). Comparing measures of citizen trust and user satisfaction as indicators of good governance: Difficulties in linking trust and satisfac-

- tion indicators. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 69(3), 329–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852303693003>
- Cardenal, A. S., Castro-Herrero, L., Schemer, C., Strömbäck, J., Stępińska, A., de Vreese, C., & Van Aelst, P. (2021). Divided we trust? The role of polarization on rally-around-the-flag effects during the Covid-19 crisis. In P. Van Aelst, & J. Blumler (Eds.), *Political communication in the time of coronavirus* (pp. 157–173). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170051>
- Christensen, T., & Laegreid, P. (2005). Trust in government: The relative importance of service satisfaction, political factors, and demography. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 28(4), 487–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2005.11051848>
- Coombs, W. T. (2009). Conceptualizing crisis communication. In R. L. Heath, & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 99–118). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203891629>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2006). Unpacking the halo effect: Reputation and crisis management. *Journal of Communication Management*, 10(2), 123–137. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13632540610664698>
- Cornia, A., Dressel, K., & Pfeil, P. (2016). Risk cultures and dominant approaches towards disasters in seven European countries. *Journal of Risk Research*, 19(3), 288–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.961520>
- Delhey, J., Steckermeier, L. C., Boehnke, K., Deutsch, F., Eichhorn, J., Kühnen, U., & Welzel, C. (2021). *A virus of distrust? Existential insecurity and trust during the coronavirus pandemic*. Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg DSS Working Paper No. 80.
- Devine, D., Gaskell, J., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2020). Trust and the coronavirus pandemic: What are the consequences of and for trust? An early review of the literature. *Political Studies Review*, 19(2), 274–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920948684>
- De Vries, C. E., Bakker, B., Hobolt, S., & Arceneaux, K. (2020). Crisis signaling: How Italy's coronavirus lockdown affected incumbent support in other European countries. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3606149>
- Dinesen, P., & Jæger, M. (2013). The effect of terror on institutional trust: New evidence from the 3/11 Madrid terrorist attack. *Political Psychology*, 34(6), 917–926. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43783768>
- Doty, R. M., Peterson, B. E., & Winter, D. G. (1991). Threat and authoritarianism in the United States, 1978–1987. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(4), 629–640. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.61.4.629>
- Earle, T. C. (2010). Trust in risk management: A model-based review of empirical research. *Risk Analysis*, 30(4), 541–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2010.01398.x>
- Esaïasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in government institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from 'the Swedish experiment'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Györfy, D. (2018). *Trust and crisis management in the European Union: An institutional account of success and failure in program countries*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69212-8>
- Han, Q., Zheng, B., Cristea, M., Agostini, M., Bélanger, J., Gützkow, B., Kreienkamp, J., & Leander, N. (2021). Trust in government regarding Covid-19 and its associations with preventive health behaviour and prosocial behaviour during the pandemic: A cross-sectional and longitudinal study. *Psychological Medicine*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721001306>
- Herrera, H., Konradt, M., Ordoñez, G., & Trebesch, C. (2020). *Corona politics: The cost of mismanaging pandemics*. Kiel Institute for the World Economy Working Paper No. 2165. <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/224062>
- Hetherington, M. J., & Nelson, M. (2003). Anatomy of a rally effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 36(1), 37–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503001665>
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic Model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Å.

- Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis* (pp 184–198). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669-17>
- Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: When the Covid-19 pandemic becomes “normalized.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(sup1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- Johansson, B., Sohlberg, J., Esaiasson, P., & Ghersetti, M. (2021). Why Swedes don't wear face masks during the pandemic – A consequence of blindly trusting the government. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2), 335–358. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.4.2.6>
- Johansson, B., & Vigsø, O. (2021). Sweden: Lone hero or stubborn outlier? In D. Lilleker, I. A. Coman, M. Gregor, & G. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid 19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis* (pp. 155–164). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Kantar Sifo. (n.d.). *Insikter kring coronavirus [Insights about coronavirus]*. <https://www.kantarsifo.se/insikter-kring-coronavirus>
- Kim, J. (2017). Elaborating the halo effect of SCCT: How and why performance history affects crisis responsibility and organizational reputation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 29(6), 277–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2017.1405812>
- Lambert, A. J., Schott, J. P., & Scherer, L. (2011). Threat, politics, and attitudes: Toward a greater understanding of rally-around-the-flag effects. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20(6), 343–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721411422060>
- Liang M., & Christensen, T. (2019). Government trust, social trust, and citizens' risk concerns: Evidence from crisis management in China. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 42(2), 383–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2018.1464478>
- Ling Wong, C. M., & Jensen, O. (2020). The paradox of trust: Perceived risk and public compliance during the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(7-8), 1021–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1756386>
- Luhman, N. (1979). *Trust and power*. Wiley.
- Morse, B., Grépin K. A., Blair R. A., & Tsai, L. (2016). Patterns of demand for non-Ebola health services during and after the Ebola outbreak: Panel survey evidence from Monrovia, Liberia. *BMJ Global Health*, 1, e000007. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2015-000007>
- Mueller, J. E. (1973). *War, presidents, & public opinion*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Norwegian Directorate of Health. (2022). *Befolkningsundersøkelse covid-19 [Population survey Covid-19]*. <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/tema/beredskap-og-krisehandtering/koronavirus/befolkningsundersokelse-covid-19>
- Novus. (2022). *Novus egna undersökningar [Novus's own research]*. <https://novus.se/novus-coronastatus>
- Oksanen, A., Kaakinen, M., Latikka, R., Savolainen, L., Savela, N., & Koivula, A. (2020). Regulation and trust: 3-Month follow-up study on Covid-19 mortality in 25 European countries. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 6(2), e19218. <https://doi.org/10.2196/19218>
- Olsen, A. L., & Hjorth, F. (2020). Willingness to distance in the Covid-19 pandemic. *OSF Preprints*. <https://osf.io/xpwg2/>
- Parsons Leigh, J., Fiest, K., Brundin-Mather, R., Plotnikoff, K., Soo, A., Sypes E. E., Whalen-Browne, L., Ahmed, S. B., Burns, K. E. A., Fox-Robichaud, A., Kupsch, S., Longmore, S., Murthy, S., Niven, D. J., Rochweg, B., & Stelfox, H. T. (2020). A national cross-sectional survey of public perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic: Self-reported beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors. *PLoS ONE*, 15(10), e0241259. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241259>
- Politico. (n.d.). *Poll of polls*. Retrieved September, 2021, from <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls>
- Poortinga, W., & Pidgeon, N. F. (2003). Exploring the dimensionality of trust in risk regulation. *Risk Analysis*, 23(5), 961–972. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1539-6924.00373>
- Sellnow, T. W., & Seeger, M. L. (2021). *Theorizing crisis communication* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Siegrist, M., & Zingg, A. (2014). The role of public trust during pandemics: Implications for crisis communication. *European Psychologist*, 19(1), 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000169>

- Sniderman, P. M., Petersen, M. B., Slothuus, R., Stubager, R., & Petrov, P. (2019). Reactions to terror attacks: A heuristic model. *Political Psychology*, 40(51), 245–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12575>
- Social Science Research Institute. (n.d.). *Covid tracking*. <https://fel.hi.is/is/covid-tracking>
- University of Gothenburg. (n.d.). *The SOM institute*. <https://www.gu.se/en/som-institute>
- Van Aelst, P. (2021). Covid-19 as an ideal case for a rally-around-the-flag? How government communication, media coverage and a polarized public sphere determine leadership approval in times of crisis. In P. Van Aelst, & J. Blumler (Eds.), *Political communication in the time of coronavirus* (pp. 1–14). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170051>
- Van der Weerd, W., Timmermans, D. R., Beaujean, D. J., Oudhoff, J., & van Steenbergen, J. E. (2011). Monitoring the level of government trust, risk perception and intention of the general public to adopt protective measures during the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic in the Netherlands. *BMC Public Health*, 11, 575. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-575>
- Woods, J. (2011). The 9/11 effect: Toward a social science of the terrorist threat. *The Social Science Journal*, 48(1), 213–233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2010.06.001>
- Välvirronen, E., & Jallinoja, P. (2021). Suomalaisten näkemykset asiantuntijoista ja rokotuksista: Havaintoja muutoksista ensimmäiseltä koronavuodelta [Finns' views on experts and vaccinations: Observations on changes from the first corona year]. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, 86(3), 323–333. <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/332964>

Citizens' news use during Covid-19

Concerns about misinformation and reliance on local news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden

Brita Ytre-Arne & Hallvard Moe

Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This chapter analyses how citizens in four Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, where news from various sources mixed with abundant information across digital platforms. In response to concerns about false and misleading information in a public health crisis, we ask to which degree Nordic citizens worried about being misinformed regarding Covid-19, and how they evaluated the trustworthiness of pandemic news. In the context of a global crisis affecting everyday life, we ask how people relied on local news for information specifically relevant to their situation. To answer our research questions, we draw on comparative survey data from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, combined with qualitative in-depth interviews on pandemic news experiences in Norway. Our analysis contributes with a contextualised understanding of pandemic news use in the Nordics, emphasising the relevance of societal structures of high trust and extensive news provision.

Keywords: news use, misinformation, local news, trust, qualitative interviews, survey

Introduction

In a digital media environment with abundant information, how do people seek information when a major societal crisis occurs, one that affects people's daily lives in local communities as well as occupying national and global news

Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2023). Citizens' news use during Covid-19: Concerns about misinformation and reliance on local news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 303–324). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-14>

agendas? In this chapter, we analyse how citizens in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden followed the Covid-19 pandemic, asking how people navigated news sources for trustworthy and relevant information. We investigate the central role of the news media in this regard, but consider news as interwoven with social media, digital platforms, and various kinds of information in a hybrid media environment. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated problems of information overload (de Bruin et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) as well as worries about the extent and consequences of digital misinformation (Damstra et al., 2021), expressing some of the ways in which the pandemic constituted a “critical moment” for journalism (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

At the outset of an intense crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns for misinformation are likely to abound (Damstra et al., 2021). This was evident in early 2020 as the World Health Organization warned the world not only of the pandemic, but also of an “infodemic” of too much information – both accurate and false – making it hard for people to find “trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (WHO, 2020: 2). The term infodemic has since been criticised for being oversimplified and harmful, conflating problems of deception and abundance and inadequately portraying reception as infection (Simon & Camargo, 2021). Research into so-called fake news underlines the need for deeper understandings of how this phenomenon is experienced by audiences, in the context of their lives and broader information practices (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019).

Instead of assuming that misinformation is an excessive problem amplified during crisis, we ask how people in the Nordics actually navigated their information environments during the Covid-19 pandemic, looking for what the World Health Organization also considered necessary: relevant and trustworthy guidance. Our premise is that citizens’ everyday media use constitutes a fundamental backdrop for understanding societal resilience and crisis communication, as people are prone to turn to media sources they find relevant and with which they had established relationships before the crisis (Odén et al., 2016). This implies that more knowledge is needed on how ordinary citizens find and interpret information in their daily lives – and that societal context is crucial.

We particularly highlight the extensive proliferation of digital media technologies, as well as the dependable access to local and regional news media, as presumably relevant factors in people’s information practices during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries. We are particularly interested in the role of local news, but consider that “news” – here meaning the provision of journalistic media – in practice mixes with information from other sources, ranging from employers and government bodies to activists and acquaintances. Pandemic news has partly focused on information also disseminated elsewhere, such as infection rates provided by health authorities and tracking sites, or countermeasures that are also the topic of press briefings and institutional guid-

ance. Examining the role of the local news media – while presumably mixed with other information sources – is particularly relevant for understanding how people sought information about the pandemic as a crisis affecting their daily lives in the places where they live, bringing concerns of the global health crisis into Nordic societies and their everyday lives.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse how people in the Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic for information they perceived as trustworthy and relevant to their situation. We raise two research questions:

- RQ1. To which degree were Nordic citizens concerned about pandemic disinformation, and how did they evaluate trustworthiness?
- RQ2. What was the role of local news in providing Nordic citizens with information about the Covid-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, we draw on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. We use Nordic country data from the comparative *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021) survey (which included Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) to provide an overview of how citizens perceived threats of misinformation and usage of local news. Further, we draw on a qualitative in-depth interview study with Norwegian news users – conducted in late 2020, in which twelve informants recounted their pandemic news experiences – to delve deeper into perceptions of trustworthiness and relevance.

Our findings shed new light on the complicated relationship between personal experience, information abundance, and crisis communication to citizens, and they untangle some aspects of how the Nordic news media informed citizens about Covid-19. We emphasise reliance on local media for pandemic information relevant to daily life, and we discuss how Nordic citizens appear slightly less concerned about exposure to digital misinformation than most other Europeans, and what this might mean. From our qualitative analysis, we emphasise how assessments of risk and personal relevance are key to pandemic news experiences in a situation of overall high levels of trust in the media. These findings point to how key features of established media systems, but also social systems more broadly, come into play in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature review: Pandemic news use and the Nordic context

The research literature on news use is substantial, and a key concern over the past decade has been to investigate what an increasingly fragmented, hyper-connected digital information environment means for news users (Bengtsson

& Johansson, 2020; Elvestad & Phillips, 2018; Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2020). News items are dispersed across a proliferation of interconnected digital media platforms, mixed with other forms of communication, while users' attention and time remain limited commodities (Aharoni et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018; Ørmen, 2016). Acute crisis situations can, at least temporarily, uproot established practices and lead to more intense information-gathering, for which citizens depend on the media not just for updates on unfolding events, but also for sense-making and understanding (Lowrey, 2004; Moe et al., 2019; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015). As also indicated by experimental crisis communication research into information-seeking behaviours, audiences combine a multitude of different media in crisis situations, while overload is an observed problem (Austin et al., 2012; Jin et al., 2016). The role of the news media remains central, and established everyday media habits continue to be important to predicting where Nordic citizens turn for information during a crisis (Odén et al., 2016). Across these studies, social media are found to be increasingly relevant for young people – as opposed to legacy media for older age groups – and preconceived notions of trust and credibility are found to be part of news navigation.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, several studies have documented what appears to be a widely shared pattern: News use increased drastically in March 2020 as the first wave of Covid-19 infections spread globally and several countries went into lockdown, but then it soon decreased and eventually formed a more complicated, long-term pattern of use, with differentiated user patterns and problems of information overload. Such findings have been reported in the UK (Kleis Nielsen et al., 2020), in various countries in Eastern Europe (Mihelj et al., 2021), in Belgium (Vandenplas et al., 2021), in the Netherlands (de Bruin et al., 2021; Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2022), and in Australia (Mannell & Meese, 2022). This pattern is also supported by comparative analyses building on survey data conducted before and after the early pandemic waves (Newman et al., 2020, 2021). Some studies specifically investigated the restructuring of news habits during the Covid-19 pandemic with quantitative and qualitative methods, indicating that an interplay of contextual and individual factors shape long-term pandemic news use (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2021). The comparative study by Van Aelst and colleagues (2021) investigated the relationship between established trust in the media and increased use of legacy media, while both point to differences in being personally affected by the pandemic as important to explaining news habits. Similar to strong but short-lived rally-around-the-flag effects found in public opinion studies (Johansson et al., 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 13), research on pandemic news use has already documented that the early spike was followed by more complicated patterns building on differentiated societal contexts and user practices.

Looking more specifically at the Nordic countries, pre-pandemic news use patterns were characterised by a proliferation of digital technologies, high levels of societal trust, and continued use of legacy media (e.g., Newman et al., 2020). The Nordic societies can be described as media welfare states, with characteristics such as well-respected freedom of the press; a robust self-regulatory regime; proactive state support at an arm's-length distance for a private, commercial press; and partly with a diverse structure of providers with universal appeal and high levels of consumption as a result (Syvertsen et al., 2014). These high consumption levels should also be understood in the context of the Nordic societies' historically "comparative homogeneity, wealth, and egalitarian social structure" (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 25). While one could argue that the Nordic countries are similar enough to be lumped together, one can always zoom in to look for differences. The argument for a Nordic model must be empirically grounded, and we should be careful not to overstate uniqueness compared with other societies.

We can synthesise from the state of the research field that news use does change during a crisis, but that this change intersects with patterns and practices – and societal structures – established beforehand. For the Nordics, we can assume that key characteristics such as trust, digitalisation, and comparatively strong legacy news media will be important to news use in a pandemic crisis. A Nordic report on news media during the Covid-19 pandemic found a shared tendency of increased interest in legacy media content and accelerated digital transformation (Ohlsson et al., 2021). In Sweden, reports have found stable trust in news media as a societal institution during the pandemic, but also some patterns of decreasing trust, particularly regarding local morning newspapers – potentially ascribed to reactions to paywalled content (Andersson, 2021). Regarding qualitative studies on pandemic news use in the Nordic countries, our qualitative work in Norway has analysed the early lockdown news spike through the lens of "doomscrolling" (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). These studies investigated some aspects of how citizens have sought to manage in the uncertain and complex information environment of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter contributes by combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore how Nordic citizens sought trustworthy and locally relevant information.

Methods: Quantitative patterns and qualitative news experiences

Our quantitative analysis is based on data from the *Retuers Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021). The survey was conducted with national partners across and beyond Europe, and the data collection was conducted by YouGov with an online questionnaire in early 2021. Denmark,

Finland, Norway, and Sweden were included along with almost 40 other countries in Europe and worldwide (Iceland was not included in the survey).

The samples are based on self-recruited panels, where respondents were invited to participate measured against quotas based on age, gender, and region (see Moe, 2019; Eastbury, 2022). An advantage of using panels is the high motivation levels among the respondents; a disadvantage is that the samples are prone to biases, since certain types of people are more likely to volunteer for inclusion and longevity in such panels. While this is a challenge shared by everyone studying humans, the panel structure does potentially amplify the challenge. In the present survey, this challenge is mitigated through the sampling as well as through weighting (Eastbury, 2022). Earlier tests, conducted, for example, by Strabac and Aalberg (2011), showed only marginal differences between the answers given by telephone respondents and by online panel participants on issues of news knowledge and related questions. Still, the limitation is an important issue to raise, especially when comparing datasets across societal settings.

Importantly, the samples in the Reuters datasets only reflect the population in each country that has access to the Internet, typically disfavours less affluent or older segments of the population, as well as those with low levels of formal education. For some of the countries in the general study, this is a major problem, though it is less of a problem for the four Nordic countries due to the very high levels of Internet penetration: 98 per cent for Denmark and Norway, 96 per cent for Sweden, and 94 per cent for Finland (the data have been weighted) (Newman et al., 2021). While in previous years the survey has filtered out those who do not use news at certain regular intervals, the 2021 data includes all respondents.

Selected variables from the dataset focus on experiences with news use during the Covid-19 pandemic – especially pandemic-related news and information – and provide a basic overview of some key characteristics of news use amongst Nordic citizens during the pandemic. Concerning the first research question, the survey tackles experience with misinformation with statements and questions that avoid the term fake news. The survey first probes general concern with the occurrence of untrustworthy information online, and then asks for respondents' own experiences encountering misleading information related to a range of topics, including Covid-19. Second, regarding local news, respondents were invited to think about using local information in general, and then relate that to different topics – including a follow-up on Covid-19 – and through which media such local information was accessed. It should be noted that the survey focused on modes of news use (e.g., brands, devices, formats) and did not include specific questions on, for example, national news or types of news content that could be directly compared with attention to local information and news.

We are interested both in how the Nordic countries stand apart from other countries and in how the Nordic countries differ compared with each other. We include, for the sake of comparison, figures from contrasting cases: the US and the UK, as well-researched cases whose media systems and political systems have features far different from what is found in the Nordics (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004); Hungary, as a European state which has recently experienced a strong tendency towards authoritarianism (Bajomi-Lazar, 2017); and the Netherlands and Germany, as European countries thought to be more similar to the Nordics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

As our analysis demonstrates, there are considerable similarities between the Nordic countries included in the Reuters survey, enabling us to draw on a single-country study for qualitative insights that might illustrate some of the themes we emphasise. We utilise here an in-depth interview study on pandemic news experiences, conducted in Norway in November and December 2020, a point in time that constituted a second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the capital Oslo most severely affected. The informants who were interviewed included men and women of different age groups and occupations and with different pandemic experiences. They were recruited from a broader sample who had replied to a qualitative questionnaire during the first lockdown in early 2020 (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). In the interviews, informants were asked to narrate and reflect upon their pandemic news experiences, from first hearing of Covid-19 until the point of the interview in late 2020. Questions further explored risk perceptions, information practices, and interpretations of news in different stages of the pandemic. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian and excerpts quoted in the chapter have been translated by the authors. The interviews were analysed by creating analytical portraits of each informant, including their media repertoires (Hasebrink & Dörmeyer, 2012) and their personal pandemic experience, as well as a thematic analysis across interviews to follow up on particularly striking findings, such as a preoccupation with monitoring infection rates (Dahl & Ytre-Arne, 2021).

In the following analysis, we answer the research questions on navigating news sources for trustworthy and locally relevant information, building on both quantitative and qualitative data for each. We first take a closer look at how people attempted to filter out misinformation and assess which sources were credible, and next, we analyse the role of local news in changing everyday situations. For both these themes, we discuss the meaning of the Nordic context.

Nordic patterns: Misinformation and trustworthy sources

An overarching finding in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* is that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated or exacerbated previously noted tendencies in the transformation to a digital and increasingly platform-driven news

environment (Newman et al., 2021), including a continued decline in print, and increase in online, news. People turned to a wide array of sources of news and information, of which live television and online news were particularly adaptable to reduced mobility and a more homebound daily life.

The 2021 data also highlights increased levels of trust in news and a stronger reliance on trusted and well-established news providers – at least in countries with strong and independent public service media (Newman et al., 2021). The Nordic countries fit such descriptions well, with Finnish respondents reporting the overall highest levels of general trust in the news, and with providers such as the Norwegian newspaper VG excelling in terms of trust levels. One way to proceed from such general findings is to look at the concern about misinformation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 14.1 compares the Nordic population with those in a selection of similar and different media systems in terms of their level of concern about fake news on the Internet. Respondents from the Nordics do not stand apart here – at least not in unison – when it comes to the general worry about fake or misleading information online.

Table 14.1 *Concern about misinformation on the Internet in connection with the news (per cent)*

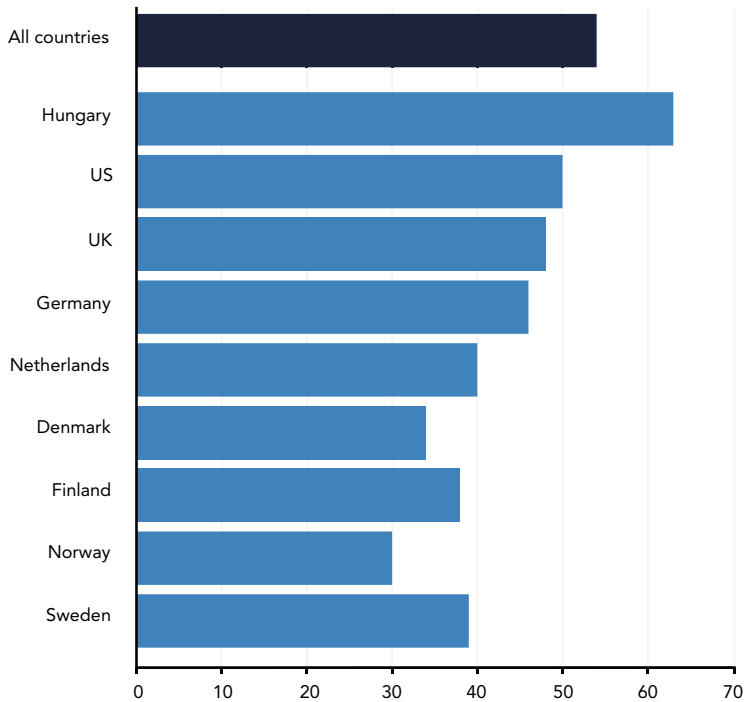
	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Nether- lands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Agree	58	56	64	66	37	40	40	60	45	51
Disagree	14	13	12	11	23	18	15	14	20	18

Comments: Survey question: “Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet”. Answers were given on a 1–5 scale. The table shows results of “Strongly/partly agree” versus “Strongly/partly disagree”; thus, neutral answers are excluded. N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009, UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

As shown by Table 14.1, Finns are slightly more worried than the overall average in the survey, and significantly more so than Danes. Germans are less worried than any of the Nordics on an aggregated level. The high levels of concern in the US and the UK might be related to the attention given to allegations of fake news, linked to political populism and polarised public debate. Hungary, a media system where editorial freedom is challenged, might also provide fertile ground for concerns about misinformation, while the reasons why Finns are equally concerned are more difficult to determine. Moving from expressions of worry to actual experiences might bring us closer to an understanding. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we can look at people’s experiences of false or misleading information about Covid-19. Here, a somewhat different picture emerges.

Figure 14.1 Experience with encountering misleading or false information about Covid-19 (per cent)



Comments: Survey question: "Have you seen false or misleading information about any of the following topics, in the last week?" N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

Figure 14.1 shows overall lower levels across the Nordic region, when compared both with countries having different media systems (US and UK, but also Hungary), as well as more similar systems (Germany and the Netherlands). The number of respondents who reported having experienced misinformation is lower in the Nordic countries, and particularly low in Norway. As such, it seems as if people in the Nordic region do worry about false and misleading information (especially Finland), as people do elsewhere, but they have not experienced it to the same degree in their own pandemic-related information environment.

Looking closer at which sources people might have in mind when it comes to digital misinformation, we can observe how patterns of trust and distrust established *before* the pandemic have considerable relevance in this specific context as well. Table 14.2 lists several actors who could potentially be sources of misinformation.

Table 14.2 *Expected sources of misleading information about Covid-19 online (per cent)*

	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Nether- lands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Government, politicians/political parties in my country	29	41	33	19	19	17	13	18	10	16
Foreign governments, politicians/political parties	9	5	7	5	7	6	7	11	10	8
Ordinary people	16	13	13	17	10	10	15	17	14	18
Activists/-groups	15	10	10	25	31	37	30	20	26	22
Celebrities	6	3	5	6	8	9	7	9	10	5
Journalists/news org	11	12	13	10	6	7	6	7	9	8
Not concerned about any of these	7	7	7	9	9	5	10	8	12	11
Don't know	8	8	12	10	10	9	12	9	10	12

Comments: Survey question: "Thinking specifically about coronavirus (Covid-19) and its effects, which of the following sources, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information from...". N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005. Totals do not always sum up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

One key dividing line is between individuals and state or institutionalised political actors. While Hungarians – living with weaker independent media and with pressures against freedom of expression – worry the most about their own political institutions, Nordic respondents clearly point to activists as the main culprits. The terms “activist” or “activist group” are, of course, open to interpretation, but can in this context be presumed to include, for instance, vaccination sceptics or conspiracy theory advocates. Journalists and news organisations are identified by a small minority across the Nordic countries as potential spreaders of misinformation.

Overall, the Nordic patterns in terms of fear of misinformation about Covid-19 appears to be in line with the high levels of societal trust – including trust in politicians, authorities, and legacy media – present in the Nordic countries. We now turn to our qualitative interview study from Norway to delve deeper into what trust in news could mean during the Covid-19 pandemic.

News experiences: Trust and alignment of risk perceptions

In our qualitative interview material, we also found expressions of how the unusual pandemic situation intersected with formerly established attitudes and beliefs about whom to trust for news, as people tried to orient themselves in the abundance of Covid-19 information. Such orientations started from previously established media repertoires, although the meaning of these shifted as people felt that their daily lives, and society in general, was changing. The temporality of the Covid-19 crisis matters considerably to news experiences: Our in-depth interviews were conducted in late 2020, a time of second-infection waves, new lockdowns, increasing fatigue – and yet no vaccines. Informants tended to reflect upon their information practices during the early phase of lockdown as a distinct period (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) after which they developed information strategies that were less consuming of their time and attention, but that still needed to include the most relevant pandemic news.

Regarding trust, our qualitative study portrays a complex picture. Some informants spoke about how they evaluated the trustworthiness of Covid-19 information, assessed the credibility of different sources, and which kinds of news they disliked or felt that others could be scared of or fooled by. Such considerations appeared to be part of a shared mode of interpretation, although there were individual differences in which media or sources people singled out as trustworthy or problematic. However, in addition to these relatively specific discussions of trustworthiness, informants expressed concern about whether news media could be trusted to adequately communicate the appropriate level of gravity regarding the pandemic as a societal crisis. They talked about their feelings of being in or out of sync with the overall risk perception conveyed through the news, with some criticising what they found to be sensationalist exaggerations, and others arguing that the media had been too slow in understanding the extent of the crisis. Below, we look at some examples of what such navigation could mean to different informants.

Erik, a consultant in his 30s, described himself in his interview as very critical towards so-called mainstream media, which he found to be filled with click-bait and barely hidden commercial agendas. His media repertoire included gaming and entertainment streaming services and a variety of news outlets – from the public service broadcaster NRK to alternative right-wing media – although he also distanced himself from some of these. He explained that he was not necessarily looking for news he agreed with, but that he wanted journalism to be more precise in referencing sources and relying on science. He claimed to prefer *expert* knowledge: He wanted the news to communicate more directly what experts were saying – to reference reports and scientific recommendations – whether the topic was climate change or the pandemic. This made him sceptical towards having news disseminated through journalists: “A random guy, I don’t

even know what he does or his education level, he writes ‘this is how it is’... I feel that is the case with a lot with the major news actors”. During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, Erik felt that the media – for once – got things right:

In this one instance, they are correct that this is actually dangerous. There are new things all the time of course... bird flu, swine flu, butter shortage crisis, it’s always something, but this time they were right – this thing is dangerous. One should not shrug at it, should not trust them less this time. I don’t feel they have had any reason for having an agenda, because when people are scared they buy newspapers and consume lots and lots of media. The media can just spread the truth now, spread what is really happening, and actually make a profit.

There was also a personal side to Erik’s assessments of Covid-19 as dangerous: He described a strong emotional reaction to a news reportage from a market in Wuhan in early 2020, feeling shocked by the conditions and fearing the repercussions. Then, he was infected himself, as one of the first confirmed cases in his small town, which led him to spend a long time in isolation with his partner and child. He described the experience as “surreal”, as he was feeling fairly well but still isolating strictly, according to the belief that “if I leave the house, other people could die”. In that early phase, he relied on direct contact with local health authorities to find out what the regulations were, for instance, whether his partner could take their child outside. He did not trust information transmitted through social media or local news – he preferred to hear directly from the experts. After recovering, Erik experienced his personal situation during the pandemic as good: working from home, taking care of his family, and gaming with friends.

Erik’s story shows how preformed trust and distrust in the media, as well as previously established media habits and source credibility assessments, all played into his pandemic news experience. However, the meanings and conditions of trust changed with the feeling of living in a real-life, and not a media-enhanced, crisis: Suddenly, he found that scary headlines were actually called for and that the expert knowledge he espoused received a more prominent place on the news agenda. Mainstream media could be trusted insofar as their commercialised interests, as he conceived them, now aligned with his own, making him appear more in sync with his information environment.

Another informant is Susanne, a woman in her 40s who worked in communication and became unemployed when the Covid-19 pandemic began. In her interview, she described how this situation led her to use media to regulate her moods and activities: Suddenly, she had a lot of time on her hands, and she spent it on podcasts, international news, and documentaries, seeking to feel engaged and updated but not dragged down into gloom and doom. She provided the following account of evolving pandemic news experiences:

There are phases. In the beginning the exposure... in any crisis, you breathe and live within the news, all the time. Updates cannot come fast enough. You can't have too many sources, you get paralysed from thinking about other things. [...] I have worked in some international settings, and that is kind of a correction – to see the scope, the big picture. You become really oriented towards the outside, but it is about knowing where you belong, how to navigate. When things became less dense... then I suddenly avoided debate programmes, I would rather read an article... I did not need opinions because I had my opinion, you know? And then you just need to correct that once in a while. Tap in to see that “ok, I am still on track”.

Like Erik, Susanne appeared concerned with overall perceptions of the pandemic, although she appeared more flexible in negotiating her opinions in relation to the news. While Susanne's news habits and societal views appear different from Erik's, she expressed many similar points of criticism towards the news media, for instance, a dislike for media personalities that she felt received too much attention. As the pandemic went on, she said, she developed an increased awareness of interpreting what she described as people's “positions”. Here, she mentioned differences between the pandemic strategies of Norway and Sweden as an example:

I have many friends in Sweden – people who are usually not afraid of speaking out on controversial issues. [...] First they were quiet, or gave just positive news, for instance, posting articles from *The New York Times* praising Sweden. If I talked to them, they found me extreme for shutting things down, while they were supporting Tegnell so much they could have him tattooed on their chests, you know? But now, there are some small signs... More people are ill, and they are realising this is a really shitty situation. Now they are critical, although in a low-voiced deliberative Swedish way. [...] So yes, I am concerned with where people *stand*.

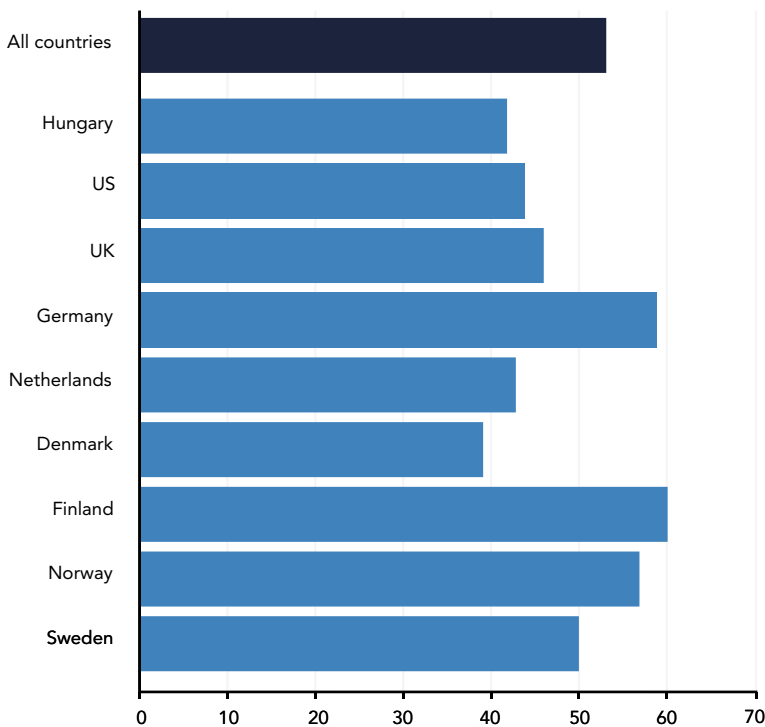
Regarding the navigation for trustworthy information, it is important to highlight that our interview material conveys media criticism, not blatant distrust. Our informants did not accuse Nordic news media – nor politicians or health authorities – of deliberately disseminating misinformation or hiding important aspects of the pandemic from the public. Instead, much of the media critique referred to themes and tropes not specific to Covid-19, such as criticism of click-bait or preferences for news outlets deemed to be “balanced”. A particular theme that seemed heavily accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, however, was risk alignment as part of considerations of trust. People appeared more comfortable in their information environment if they could trust that the news conveyed an overall opinion on the pandemic that corresponded to their own views, formed partly by news and partly by personal experiences.

Nordic patterns: The importance of local news

Our second research question investigates the role of local news in Nordic citizens’ informational practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. As noted, research has demonstrated an increase in general news use during the pandemic. We presume here that a pandemic – by definition, a global event – will nevertheless turn people’s attention towards how their own communities are affected, and that local news could play a role in this regard.

Though we do not have directly comparable data on respondents’ attention to national or international news and information, we would argue that our presumption is substantiated by the survey data shown in Figure 14.2.

Figure 14.2 Use of local information about the pandemic (per cent)



Comments: Survey question: “Thinking about local news and information, which of the following topics have you accessed in the last week? Please select all that apply”. *N:* All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

When asked about what kind of local information people had accessed across all countries included in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, a majority claimed to have received local information about Covid-19 or other health-related news. This was the most accessed category of local news and information – ranking above politics, sports, jobs, and crime. For each of the selected countries, the pandemic is also the most popular category, except local weather. This testifies to the ever-present importance of the pandemic during the period of data collection, but also to the relevance of information directly related to everyday life. But there are differences between countries, also within the Nordic region: Danish respondents stand apart, as only 39 per cent received this kind of local information – lower than the average of all countries, as well as lower than in much larger individual countries (US) and countries with different media systems. Geography and demography might be important here, with Denmark being a small country with, perhaps, less tendency to differentiate between localities on the topic. By comparison, Norway is also small, but with a more dispersed population. Another possible source of such differences could lie in the media systems. If we look at the role of local news providers as a component of people’s repertoire for information sources about the pandemic, we can perhaps get a better understanding of differences between the Nordic countries.

Table 14.3 *Selected preferred sources for information about Covid-19 and other health-related news (per cent)*

	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Local newspaper/freesheet or websites	19	20	15	17	32	41	37	44	53	39
Local TV or websites	22	10	39	22	17	16	17	9	8	14
Local radio or websites	9	8	6	8	14	6	5	7	3	9
Social media	14	31	7	11	5	5	12	10	7	7
Search engines	14	9	9	13	8	9	8	7	4	6
Other sites or apps	7	5	11	13	10	0	3	7	2	4

Comments: Survey question: “You said you have accessed local news and information about the following topic in the last week... Which source offers the best information for you on this topic? Please select just one option”. N: All countries = 40,3016; Hungary = 844; US = 882; UK = 929; Germany = 1,183; Netherlands = 864; Denmark = 779; Finland = 1,209; Norway = 1,144; Sweden = 1,001.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

Table 14.3 accentuates how different societal settings influence the selection of sources. In countries with a strong local media provision, these appear as the most preferred source for a larger portion of the respondents. In the US – a large country with established local broadcasting networks – local television is mentioned more often than elsewhere. In the Nordic countries with strong local newspapers, such as Norway, these are pointed to significantly more often. Again, the differences within the Nordic region are also noteworthy here, with Danes appearing to rely more on social media and less on local news providers. It is reasonable to interpret this finding as following the path laid by the Danish newspaper business's development, which is marked by fewer local subscription-based actors compared with its northern neighbours, more prolific regional and national outlets, and a comparatively early development of a freesheet industry (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2014). The contrast is most clear when compared with Norway. The question, then, is how this general pattern is reflected in the everyday news experiences of people in Norway.

News experiences: Relevance to daily life in the pandemic

We now follow up on the question regarding locally relevant information by returning to the qualitative interview study from Norway, conducted at a time when people had lived with the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic for a while. The intense and wide-reaching information gathering of the first lockdown phase had subsided, while people continued to follow the situation with a more focused notion of personally situated relevance. Our sample included informants who had migrated to Norway or lived abroad before the pandemic, and who continued to follow local developments in places they had personal connections to. In addition, they followed local information in the place they then lived, as did the rest of the sample of informants. The reduced mobility characteristic of the Covid-19 pandemic thus implied an increased orientation towards the communities in which one was located: one's temporary or permanent notions of home.

When discussing different forms of Covid-19 news, our informants talked about looking for specific information needed to proceed with life through a time of shifting restrictions and fluctuating infection rates. This could entail monitoring daily infection numbers, relying on information directly from employers or local communities, or checking in with news perceived to have direct impact on daily choices and personal areas of interest. Local news remained important for its informational qualities, supplemented by municipality websites or workplace or sector information channels. Some people changed their media habits, while others continued as before, but with a partly different experience of what relevant news meant to them.

One example is Einar, a cultural sector event worker in his 30s with high interest in news and politics. His media repertoire consisted of mixed podcasts, newspapers, and social media, with regular attention to public service news on various platforms. As his work situation was constantly affected by shifting pandemic restrictions for public events throughout 2020, Einar reflected upon his pandemic news experience:

The difference is just that I have been sitting at home working, but the way I have followed the media is more or less the same. I might feel like I do it more often, or that more is at stake, but I actually think I followed the media just as much before, just that it did not feel as close to me.

For Einar, the practical day-to-day routine of his job was suddenly a public matter, subject to medical advice, political decisions, and journalistic coverage. He relied on a variety of monitorial practices to figure out what would happen, both practically and regarding the future outlook of his line of work.

Karla, a mother of two who worked in education, describes a similar experience of searching for specific information on how to conduct her daily life: “It [news use] has normalised. Now it is more about catching the latest: what are the rules now?” Her experience of the pandemic was shaped by the shock of suddenly experiencing schools going into lockdown in March 2020, impacting both her work and her family life. In early lockdown, she followed news more closely, for instance, by watching evening news on television, which she would normally never do, as her pre-pandemic media repertoire had been centred on the smartphone and quick updates between activities:

In the beginning, you wondered how dangerous it was, how... anything you could find. And eventually it was more like... “how are we to interpret these rules?” I have two children – who can they hang out with? What is acceptable? [...] Well, really, [I looked for] anything about organising their day in the best possible way.

While locally relevant information was essential to Karla, this did not necessarily mean news from local journalistic media. For instance, she interpreted her local newspaper’s coverage of an outbreak in her home city as “just a part of the big flood of news”, and argued that the paper had contributed to unfairly accusing young people of increasing infections. Going deeper into what she considered relevant news, she said:

It is about my own interests. My personal life, the frames around our lives, particularly regarding corona, what affects us specifically. I am interested in society, politics, particularly the situation of young people, interested in mental health... It is more about what I think is important in this world.

Another informant is Kåre, a man on disability benefits who belonged to a high-risk group for Covid-19 complications. He had moved from a big city to live with family in a rural area that remained, at the time of the interview, infection free. His media repertoire consisted of a high number of local, national, and international news outlets, podcasts, and radio programmes, and he had reduced news use since the intensity of the pandemic's outbreak. Kåre talked about a distinction between following the pandemic primarily as an event in the news, and as related to personal risk assessment:

Well, to the extent that it was personal, I followed what happened in [the city where he lived], mostly, and then a bit more, not on an intellectual level, but I also followed what happened out there in the world; but I didn't sit and watch press conferences on TV, nor listen to them on the radio.

Another element of Kåre's news navigation concerned paywalls and how to circumvent them: He subscribed to digital news outlets and was willing to pay for news, but he still wanted access to more. He was critical of editorial policies and decisions regarding Covid-19 information behind paywalls, arguing that publicly relevant information needed to be broadly available. Here, the local media of what he considered his home city were particularly to blame:

Among Norwegian online news sites, I primarily used *NRK.no* and *VG.no*, since you didn't have to pay there for something I felt was important... for the journalistic mission. I mean, issues of public interest and important issues for the community. You can get them without paying, and it is a bit annoying in a time of crisis when [listing several national and regional news media] – when you have to pay for crucial information.

While acknowledging that the information was available through public service broadcaster NRK or newspapers, and that he had sufficient pandemic news outside their paywall, Kåre still argued that in the interest of the community, more local coverage of Covid-19 should be offered free of charge. This point of view corresponds to the suggestion that reactions to paywalled content could drive negativity and decrease trust towards particular news providers (Andersson, 2021). As we pointed out in the previous discussion on trust, it seems as though previously established points of media criticism were accentuated during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the overall relevance of the information provided by the news media was not questioned.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed how people in the Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic in search

for information they perceived as trustworthy and relevant. The Covid-19 crisis has illustrated the complexities of conditions of information abundance, demanding attention to how people navigate digital environments where news is just a part of the mix.

Our findings support an image of Nordic citizens who are well served by their news media – including during a pandemic crisis – and, corresponding to other research, also indicate a continued central role for news media as part of this navigation (e.g., Andersson, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2021). Our quantitative analysis found that familiar patterns of use continued, and sometimes were accentuated, in times of crisis: Nordic news users fear fake news, but they seem to experience misinformation in their information environment to a lesser extent than elsewhere. Local news remains important, but extent and selection depend on the preexisting position of local media in each country. Our qualitative analysis found that risk perception alignment and personally situated relevance were key: The Covid-19 pandemic was experienced as dramatic enough to justify continuous reporting and attention-grabbing headlines, even though people needed to filter information and be more selective over time. Our study joins others in emphasising everyday and emotional contexts of news use as central to such changes in the course of the pandemic (e.g., Broersma & Swart, 2022; Vandenplas et al., 2021).

Considering implications for crisis communication in future pandemics, or other societal crisis situations, we underline two points based on our findings. These points contribute to advancing our understanding of how people navigate complex information environments in crisis situations and can also indicate avenues for further research and conceptual development. First, regarding the fear of misinformation (Damstra et al., 2021; Simon & Camargo, 2021), we need a non-alarmist approach that takes seriously the nuances between people's attitudes towards the issue and evidence of particularly problematic encounters. Even though people might express concern about being a victim of misinformation, the actual experiences of exposure to misinformation and the sources identified as problematic can vary – and studying them further will help move beyond alarmist diagnoses and ultimately provide better grounds for combating misinformation.

Regarding the role of news media as the more trustworthy alternative, we particularly underline that extensive media criticism does not necessarily imply distrust towards the media. An important nuance that emerged in our qualitative in-depth interviews is that it is possible to be critical towards the news media and yet find them relevant and trustworthy, either in general or regarding pandemic news coverage in particular. In a societal crisis such as a pandemic, people seem prone to trust media that convey an overall perception of risk that is aligned with their own. This calls for further research into how

such risk perceptions are formed, and for attention to the relationship between personal experience and mediated information.

Our second point concerns the ways in which media users position themselves and navigate their information environments through different phases of a large-scale and long-term societal crisis (Odén et al., 2016). Orientations towards international, national, regional, local, and hyper-local information appear to overlap as well as fluctuate, but more theoretical groundwork is needed on how and why this happens. Journalism research has already documented an acute and drastic increase in the demand for news, in what we have referred to as the early Covid-19 news spike, but questions remain as to what happened afterwards, when patterns between different users appeared to diverge more (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2021). We find that previously established media systems seem to matter for both short- and long-term news navigation, turning Nordic citizens towards strong legacy media including extensive local news provision and digitalised user patterns. In addition to investigating when and why citizens look for specific information through local journalistic media compared with other sources – including social media, workplace and community websites, and everyday conversation – further theorisation of the temporality of information-seeking during crisis is also needed.

References

- Aharoni, T., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K. (2021). “Be less of a slave to the news”: A texto-material perspective on news avoidance among young adults. *Journalism Studies*, 22(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1852885>
- Andersson, U. (2021). *Förtroende för medier: Vinnare och förlorare under pandemin [Trust in media: Winners and losers during the pandemic]*. The SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Austin, L., Fisher Liu, B., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498>
- Bajomi-Lazar, P. (2017). Particularistic and universalistic media policies: Inequalities in the media in Hungary. *Javnost*, 24(2), 162–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1288781>
- Bengtsson, S., & Johansson, S. (2020). A phenomenology of news: Understanding news in digital culture. *Journalism*, 22(11), 2873–2889. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919901194>
- Broersma, M., & Swart, J. (2022). Do novel routines stick after the pandemic? The formation of news habits during Covid-19. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 551–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932561>
- Dahl, J. M., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021, August 18–20). *Monitoring the infection rate: What news users consider valuable information in the pandemic* [Conference presentation]. NordMedia, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- Damstra, A., Boomgaarden, H. G., Broda, E., Lindgren, E., Strömbäck, J., Tsifti, Y., & Vliegenthart, R. (2021). What does fake look like? A review of the literature on intentional deception in the news and on social media. *Journalism Studies*, 22(14), 1947–1963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1979423>
- de Bruin, K., de Haan, Y., Vliegenthart, R., Kruikemeier, S., & Boukes, M. (2021). News avoidance during the Covid-19 crisis: Understanding information overload. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1394–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1957967>

- Eastbury, D. (2022). *YouGov research methods: More detail on YouGov research methods*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/uncategorized/2020/yougov-research-methods/>
- Elvestad, E., & Phillips, A. (2018). *Misunderstanding news audiences: Seven myths of the social media era*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315444369>
- Groot Kormelink, T., & Klein Gunnewiek, A. (2022). From “far away” to “shock” to “fatigue” to “back to normal”: How young people experienced news during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932560>
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>
- Hasebrink, U., & Dörmeyer, H. (2012). Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices: A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments. *Participations*, 9(2), 757–779.
- Jin, Y., Fraustino, J. D., Fisher Liu, B. (2016). The scared, the outraged, and the anxious: How crisis emotions, involvement, and demographics predict publics’ conative coping. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 10(4), 289–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1160401>
- Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: When the Covid-19 pandemic becomes “normalized”. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(sup1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- Kleis Nielsen, R., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Simon, F. M. (2020, October 27). *Communications in the coronavirus crisis: Lessons for the second wave*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave>
- Lowrey, W. (2004). Media dependency during a large-scale social disruption: The case of September 11. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7(3), 339–357. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0703_5
- Mannell, K., & Meese, J. (2022). From doom-scrolling to news avoidance: Limiting news as a wellbeing strategy during Covid lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 23(3), 302–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2021105>
- Meijer, I. C., & Groot Kormelink, T. (2020). *Changing news use: Unchanged news experience?* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041719>
- Mihelj, S., Kondor, K., & Štětka, V. (2021). Audience engagement with Covid-19 news: The impact of lockdown and live coverage, and the role of polarization. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 569–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1931410>
- Moe, H. (2019). Why free news matters for social inequality: Comparing willingness to pay for news in the Nordic region. In J. Trappel (Ed.), *Digital media inequalities: Policies against divides, distrust and discrimination* (pp. 229–243). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-5550>
- Moe, H., Ytre-Arne, B., & Uberg Nærland, T. (2019). Between ritual and information: Three phases of norwegian news audiences’ sense-making of the election of Donald Trump. *Journalism*, 22(11), 2764–2780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919883103>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schultz, A., Simge, A., Robertson, C. T., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2021). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schultz, A., Simge, A., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2020). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2020*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/>
- Odén, T., Djerf-Pierre, M., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2016). *Kriskommunikation 2.0: Allmänhet, medier och myndigheter i det digitala medielandskapet [Crisis communication 2.0: Public, media, and authorities in the digital media landscape]*. MSB. <https://www.msb.se/sv/publikationer/kriskommunikation-2.0--allmanhet-medier-och-myndigheter-i-det-digitala-medielandskapet/>

- Ohlsson, J., Blach-Ørsten, M., & Willig, I. (Eds.). (2021). Covid-19 och de Nordiska nyhetsmedierna [Covid-19 and the Nordic news media]. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855473>
- Quandt, T., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2021). The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism: Introduction to special issue: Covering Covid-19: The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1199–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996253>
- Simon, F. M., & Camargo, C. Q. (2021). Autopsy of a metaphor: The origins, use and blind spots of the ‘infodemic’. *New Media and Society*. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211031908>
- Strabac, Z., & Aalberg, T. (2011). Measuring political knowledge in telephone and web surveys: A cross-national comparison. *Social Science Computer Review*, 29(2), 175–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439310371340>
- Syvvertsen, T., Enli, G., Mjøs, O. J., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. University of Michigan Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001>
- Van Aelst, P., Toth, F., Castro, L., Štětka, V., de Vreese, C., Aalberg, T., Cardenal, A. S., Corbu, N., Esser, F., Hopmann, D. N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheafer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., Strömbäck, J., & Theocharis, Y. (2021). Does a crisis change news habits? A comparative study of the effects of Covid-19 on news media use in 17 European countries. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1316–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943481>
- Vandenplas, R., Truyens, P., Vis, S., & Picone, I. (2021). Tuning out the news: A cross-media perspective on news avoidance practices of young news users in Flanders during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 22(16), 2197–2217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1990788>
- Wagner, M. C., & Boczkowski, P. J. (2019). The reception of fake news: The interpretations and practices that shape the consumption of perceived misinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 7(7), 870–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1653208>
- Westlund, O., & Gheretti, M. (2015). Modelling news media use: Positing and applying the GC/MC model to the analysis of media use in everyday life and crisis situations. *Journalism Studies*, 16(2), 133–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.868139>
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2020). *Novel coronavirus situation report – 13*. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2018). Approximately informed, occasionally monitorial? Reconsidering normative citizen ideals. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(2), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218771903>
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2021). Doomscrolling, monitoring and avoiding: News use in Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 22(13), 1739–1755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1952475>
- Ørmen, J. (2016). Are you paying attention? Keeping up with news in daily life. In J. L. Jensen, M. Mortensen, & Ørmen, J. (Eds.), *News across media: The production, distribution and consumption of news* (pp. 162–180). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692456>

Efficient authority communication in times of crisis

Examining how vulnerable language minorities experienced Covid-19 communication strategies in Finland, Norway, and Sweden

Klas Backholm^I & Camilla Nordberg^{II}

^IFaculty of Social Sciences, Business, and Economics, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

^{II} Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Abstract

This chapter investigates how vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Disadvantaged language minorities have been shown to have a higher risk of pandemic-related health issues, and information from authorities about the crisis is typically mainly focused on the majority of the population. This chapter builds on secondary analysis of existing research and uses the communication ecology framework to study how language minorities experienced information about the Covid-19 pandemic, and which information strategies they experienced as in need of improvement. Furthermore, expert suggestions of best practices for reaching vulnerable language minorities with communication about the pandemic are investigated. The results show that while mediated information channels are important, for vulnerable language minorities, interpersonal discussions and local, context-bound activities become central for efficient communication from authorities in times of complex societal crisis.

Keywords: crisis communication, communication ecology framework, complex vulnerabilities, Covid-19 pandemic, vulnerable language minorities

Backholm, K., & Nordberg, C. (2023). Efficient authority communication in times of crisis: Examining how vulnerable language minorities experienced Covid-19 communication strategies in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 325–346). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-15>

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an extraordinary event, causing a state of collective societal disruption and has thereby required unique responses and communicative actions from various authorities and governmental bodies (Boin et al., 2005). Communication from authorities has been argued to predominantly focus on majority populations, while inadequately responding to the different needs of minority groups (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Waitzberg, 2020). In this chapter, we investigate how vulnerable language minorities experienced communication from authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic in three Nordic countries: Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

The aim of the chapter is twofold: first, to study where vulnerable language minorities found their information about the Covid-19 pandemic, and which information handling strategies they thought worked well; and second, to investigate which communication efforts scholars and experts in the field suggest as best practices for reaching vulnerable language minorities in the mentioned countries, based on experiences of the pandemic to date.

The focus of the chapter is to investigate the receiver (i.e., citizen) viewpoint. This viewpoint has, to date, often been overlooked in studies and reports on vulnerable groups and the pandemic context, as scholars have conversed with professional communicators (authorities, companies, etc.) or nongovernmental organisations and volunteers, while ordinary citizens have been left out (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Waitzberg, 2020).

Methodologically, the chapter is based on a literature review and on secondary analyses of relevant research projects and reports in the studied countries. We use the communication ecology approach (Spialek & Houston, 2019; Perrault et al., 2014) to frame vulnerable language minorities' information-gathering strategies and challenges experienced. The remainder of the chapter is guided by three research questions:

- RQ1. Which components were included in the Covid-19 pandemic communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden?
- RQ2. Which pandemic communication ecology framework components did vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experience as well-functioning, and which were deemed to require further improvement?
- RQ3. Which pandemic communication efforts directed towards vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden have been suggested as best practices by scholars and experts in the field?

Framing vulnerable language minorities' communication strategies

The Nordic language minority context is heterogeneous, constituted of Indigenous peoples, ethnic and national minorities with significant history in the region, as well as migrant groups arriving after the 1960s and their descendants (Keskinen et al., 2019). Both Nordic and global studies show that many individuals with migrant backgrounds have been more severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic than the majority population. These challenges relate to access to testing and healthcare services, and higher health risks in general (Ahmed et al., 2020; Brekke, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2020).

All Nordic countries have seen comparatively higher proportions of Covid-19 cases among the foreign-born population (Hayward et al., 2021; Holmberg et al., 2022). Particularly foreign-born individuals from lower- or middle-income countries seem to have a higher mortality risk and a higher number of hospitalisations (Drefahl et al., 2020; Indseth, Grøslund et al., 2021; Rostila et al., 2021). Those with forced migration backgrounds and undocumented migrants have been particularly vulnerable, as well as migrants staying in camps and detention and reception centres (Hayward et al., 2021).

Relative poverty, neighbourhood population density, and poorer labour market conditions, with subsequent dependency on on-site work and public transport, all seem to have increased the risk of vulnerable ethnic and language minorities being exposed to Covid-19 and its consequences (Hayward et al., 2021; Rostila et al., 2021). Concerns about income loss can also become a barrier to testing, quarantine, and isolation (Labberton et al., 2021).

Language barriers have been raised as a major point of concern, as lacking proficiency in the dominant languages makes it more difficult to relate to health information from authorities (Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Zechner & Romakkaniemi, 2020). However, ethnic and language minorities constitute heterogeneous population segments, and whether being a language minority exposes individuals to increased pandemic health risks seems to be strongly linked to other structural features such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, class, educational background, and their intersections (Bowleg, 2020; Maestripieri, 2021).

These complex vulnerabilities form the context within which the analysis of communication strategies is set. With the emphasis on *vulnerable* language minorities, the focus of this chapter is thus on structurally disadvantaged language minorities who have experienced increased health risks during the Covid-19 pandemic and can be defined from various, partly overlapping, perspectives.

We utilise the disaster communication ecology approach (Spialek & Houston, 2019; Perrault et al., 2014) as a framework for understanding crisis communication complexity from the public's viewpoint. Disaster communication ecology

is the application of the more general communication ecology approach to crisis contexts and has previously been used to understand, for example, severe weather events (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022).

This approach is relevant for understanding vulnerable language minorities' communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the framework is applicable to both specific communication contexts and outspoken citizen subgroups. For instance, in a study focusing on multi-ethnic societies and disaster contexts, Liu (2022) pointed out that communication ecologies may vary between groups, as communication resources central to one ethnic group may be seen as less important for another.

According to the framework, individuals, as well as groups, construct networks of communication strategies in relation to a specific context and with a set of stated goals and activities in relation to that context. The communication ecology approach thus allows reflection on communication strategies in relation to these goals and activities (Broad et al., 2013; Spialek & Houston, 2019).

Furthermore, the ecology approach divides communication strategies into predefined subcategories rather than merely studying usage patterns in general. The categories that build up an ecology are divided into 1) mediated, 2) interpersonal, and 3) organisational actions. These categories may overlap: Mediated actions can be gathering direct information from media sources central to the context (e.g., authorities) or from news outlets, while interpersonal contact may be discussing the topic with one's social networks or community groups. Organisational actions are about taking in information in more structured meetings with, for example, regional governmental organisations (Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022).

Houston (2021) applied the communication ecology framework to the Covid-19 pandemic and proposed a set of goals that may steer communication activities among the public. The goals were "to meet the goal of coping with the threat and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Houston, 2021: 888). Activities were further specified by Houston (2021) in accordance with the above-mentioned communication strategy subcategories (mediated, interpersonal, organisational actions), and thus, as focusing on 1) seeking or sharing information about the crisis, and 2) accessing support for oneself and providing support to others. In this chapter, we investigate these goals in a sample of vulnerable language minorities.

Communication ecologies also reflect the complexity of how citizens communicate in today's media landscape. Reuter and Kaufhold (2018) and Austin and colleagues (2012) pointed out that citizens are not merely receivers but also producers and spreaders of, for example, social media content, and this will influence how crisis communication is disseminated. Thus, investigating the pandemic context with the ecology approach allows both these perspectives to be studied (Houston, 2021).

Communicating the pandemic to vulnerable language minorities

Public authorities have faced challenges communicating the pandemic to non-native-speaking individuals and groups in the Nordics (Finell et al., 2021; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021). A secondary aim of this chapter is to investigate which communication efforts scholars and experts in the field have suggested as best practices for providing vulnerable language minorities with relevant information about the pandemic.

To develop suitable communication initiatives relevant for all subgroups of citizens, authority information strategies should apply a holistic view on how to meet the diverse needs of different public sectors and underlying complex inequalities (Sellnow & Veil, 2016; Skogberg et al., 2021). This includes having a readiness to handle the general uncertainty that often accompanies crisis developments and understanding the complexity of current communication landscapes and technology (Austin et al., 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008).

In the case of vulnerable language minorities, communicators should identify certain challenges related to this. For instance, Sellnow and Veil (2016) discuss the concept of competing voices, which is when subgroups in diverse societies may not be able to, or choose not to, follow public health messages due to language barriers, trust issues, or similar concerns. Instead, such citizens may rely on alternative mass or social media information sources, inside or outside the country of residence, or on influential intermediaries within their minority group.

Challenges related to competing voices become central in global crises, where authorities may overlook the potential consequences of such multicultural conversations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, some vulnerable groups have relied more on unofficial information from social media networks or news outlets in other parts of the world, something which may generate experiences of mistrust and further marginalisation (Ekblad et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

Competing voices cannot be avoided, but a key to diminishing their potentially negative impact is audience-focused initiatives aiming at inclusion by, for instance, combining traditional one-way messaging from authorities with dialogues and exchange of information with the minority group (Sellnow & Veil, 2016; Skogheim, Orderud, Ekne Ruud, & Søholt, 2020). Such efforts may occur both as “real-life” meetings and by benefiting from technology and digital media platforms. Initiatives may be beneficial in relation to managing the crisis at hand as well as for building long-term collaboration with the citizen groups.

Method

We conducted online literature searches of relevant research projects and reports in the studied countries over three periods: May–June 2021; August–September 2021; and February–March 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing at this time, and therefore, a broad search approach was used to identify as many publications as possible.

Systematic searches in literature databases were combined with scanning mass media or social media reports about ongoing projects and reviewing content from universities, authorities, and other relevant organisations' websites and similar. Publications from ongoing projects were subsequently tracked with further searches or by directly contacting involved researchers or personnel.

We used central search terms related to the topic (e.g., vulnerable language minorities, pandemic communication, authority communication strategies) in English, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish. Additional search terms were subsequently included when observed in the preliminary scanning of documents, and new searches were conducted when necessary.

Identified documents included, for example, peer-reviewed research articles, governmental and NGO reports, and position and white papers by relevant actors. In some cases, documents identified in the last period (February–March 2022) were revised or expanded versions of previously identified texts (e.g., Sheikh et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). If content in the different versions was similar, we included the most recent one, and if content differed, and information directly relevant for the chapter topic had been excluded from more recent versions, we included both documents.

We categorised documents according to their relevance to the research questions of this chapter into the following two subgroups: group A) documents consisting of empirical data about how vulnerable minorities experienced authorities' communication about the pandemic (RQs 1 & 2); and group B) recommendations about best practices for communicating the pandemic, or similar "lessons learned"-related summaries, provided by scholars and experts in the field (RQ 3).

Documents in groups A and B were analysed in relation to the research questions using the pandemic communication ecology framework provided by Houston (2021) (for specific details about method, language, etc., in the studies, see the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter). Content reflecting vulnerable language minorities' viewpoints (group A) was thus coded as mediated, interpersonal, or organisational information handling strategies; whether the person acted as a receiver, producer, or sender of information (or a combination); and whether the person categorised the communication efforts as working well, needing further improvement, or neutral.

In group A, we found thirteen relevant studies, which were relatively equally distributed between countries (four studies were found in Finland, six in

Norway, and three in Sweden). Vulnerable minority sample sizes in the studies ranged across all documents between 5–3,668, and within countries, the sample sizes ranged between 18–3,668 in Finland, 5–617 in Norway, and 36–271 in Sweden (one Swedish study did not provide a sample size).

Interviews (nine studies) and surveys (four studies) were the methods used, and in some studies, a combination was used. Minorities in the studies were either defined by main spoken language or by country of origin. Thirteen languages were included, as well as eight countries or geographical regions, partly overlapping.

In group B, the study review resulted in 26 documents. These documents included content in which various types of experts including, for instance, community leaders, voluntary organisation workers, and researchers gave their view on best practices, based on the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic to date. Most documents focused on one country (four focused on Finland, twelve on Norway, and seven on Sweden), while some had a broader focus (Council of Europe member states, Nordic countries, and Scandinavia were the focus of one document each).

We coded content in relation to RQ3 into practices that experts had categorised as having worked well, needing further improvement, or neutral, and as practices belonging to the mediated, interpersonal, or organisational information distribution subcategories in the communication ecology framework (Houston, 2021).

Some documents included data relevant for both categories A and B and, in those cases, were included in both groups (evident in the online Supplementary Material file). In some texts, in addition to structurally vulnerable language minorities, other types of language groups that should not be seen as vulnerable in this context were also included (e.g., Swedish-speaking Finns who received information in their mother tongue). In such cases, only vulnerable minorities are included in analyses. We made the decision to include or exclude based on how the language groups were defined in the analysed document. If no such information was available, we based the decision on our knowledge of the group's situation in the country in question and, if needed, consultation with colleagues active in the country.

Documents had varying research designs and included results in varying detail; therefore, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between studies regarding the research questions. We make some general comparisons in the results section below, but these should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, in some cases, content was described in general or neutral terms, while the surrounding text allowed interpretation. In these studies, we have carefully reviewed these interpretations.

Furthermore, several additional documents were identified in the literature search that included, for instance, summaries regarding the current knowledge

base on the topic or more general empirical studies, but data directly relevant for the chapter topic or country context could not be extracted. Such texts were thus only included in the initial literature review and are partly referred to in the introduction and conclusion sections of this chapter.

Results

The results are presented below in two parts: First, we discuss results regarding the vulnerable minorities' viewpoints (RQs 1 & 2), and second, we summarise the suggestions for well-functioning communication strategies for vulnerable language groups provided by professional communication experts and other central actors (RQ3). In the concluding section of the chapter, we compare the two viewpoints and propose final suggestions for relevant communication strategies. In the text, we refer to a selection of articles and reports; a complete list of identified studies can be found in the online Supplementary Material file for this chapter.

Vulnerable language minorities' pandemic information handling strategies

In answering RQ1, we mapped central components of the Covid-19 pandemic communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable minorities. Information gathering and spreading activities were distributed across all three activity subtypes used (mediated, interpersonal, and organisational), reflecting the complexity of how media is used by citizens in general and the additional challenges a citizen faces when belonging to a vulnerable language minority.

The first communication ecology subtype, mediated activities, is about information gathering from mediated sources relevant for the context, such as authorities or mass media outlets. In the studies, such activities were the most mentioned subtype, with citizens mentioning several ways in which information from the authorities in the country of residence had reached them. Information via authorities' own online channels (e.g., websites, social media, and live broadcasts of press conferences) was central in most studies.

Some studies did not define the language of such information (Esaiasson et al., 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Skogberg et al., 2021), while others mentioned that citizens had benefited from content in the country's main language (Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021) or content translated to their own language (Brekke, 2021a; Ojwang, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2021). Usage choices naturally reflected user proficiency in the country's main language, and later in the pandemic, more information had been made available in several minority languages in all three countries.

Esaiasson and colleagues (2020) found that usage of authority websites was less common among Swedish immigrants who did not identify as a part

of the country. Accordingly, a few studies mentioned how citizens searched for information directly from health authorities in their former home country (i.e., not country of residence) via websites or similar mediated channels (Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021).

Another type of mediated communication activity mentioned by citizens in several cases was more direct mediated outreach strategies from authorities in their country of residence. This communication included receiving SMS messages from authorities or reading information posters placed in, for instance, building staircases in the area (Brekke, 2021b; Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021).

The mediated information found via authorities' own media channels was naturally combined with content that reached the citizens indirectly via traditional mass media news outlets and their social media channels. Again, some studies did not define the language of such mass media content (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Skogberg et al., 2021). In the studies that did, citizens used both mass media content in the country's main language (Brekke, 2021a; Ekblad et al., 2021; Finell et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021) and in their own language.

Regarding the latter, content was, in some languages, found via the main national media companies, such as the Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK), while some language minorities could also benefit from smaller radio stations, or similar, operated by minority groups in the country of residence (Brekke, 2021b; Ekblad et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021). Alongside mass media outlets in the country of residence, news media and similar in the former home country were central, especially for those with weak language skills in the Nordic languages (Esaïasson et al., 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

A few studies mentioned additional mediated information sources: Ojwang (2020) included research institutions and scientific journals, while Esaïasson and colleagues (2020) mentioned alternative news media. In addition, most studies mentioned social media usage in general without detailing the type of usage, which can include all the above-mentioned mediated sources but also interpersonal communication, as mentioned in the section below.

Moving on to the second dimension of communication efforts in the communication ecology framework, interpersonal contacts are when information about a topic is spread via direct contact with peers or similar. A clear result from the analyses is that, in the reviewed minority groups, such strategies became especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Family, friends, colleagues, and other peers were central in information gathering. Interpersonal support was illustrated in several ways in the studies, with citizens in all three countries turning to family, workplace colleagues, fellow students, and similar peers both via direct face-to-face contact and social media. With these contacts, citizens strived to collect more information, get help

with interpreting information received, and spread previously collected information themselves (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). Several studies (Finell et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2021; Skogberg et al., 2021) mentioned this as one of the most central or best forms of support. The Swedish sample in Ekblad and colleagues' (2021) study reported that the first information that reached them in their mother tongue was via such channels.

As mentioned above, the relevance of social media usage generally (i.e., without specification of how social media was used and thus potentially including mediated or interpersonal communication) was mentioned in several studies (Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021). Swedish samples (Esaiasson et al., 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021) mentioned that social media became more central for citizens who lacked language skills in the country's main language. Norwegian minorities also combined information that they had received directly from mass media in their former home countries with content that their family and friends there had identified and then forwarded via, for instance, social media (Brekke, 2021b; Madar et al., 2022).

Some studies mentioned a more specific form of interpersonal collaboration between authorities and minority citizens: information ambassadors (Brekke, 2021a; Finell et al., 2021). Such ambassadors are members of the community that have the task of distributing health information to other citizens. The ambassadors are supported by the authorities and sometimes work on a voluntary basis or as employed communicators.

The ambassadors' activities include both interpersonal and organisational communication efforts (see more about the latter below). Interpersonal communication activities involving ambassadors in Finland and Norway included, for instance, face-to-face contact and making and spreading videos and similar content to social media networks (Brekke, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021). In many cases, the ambassadors had been actively spreading information about the pandemic to peers already before they became ambassadors (Brekke, 2021a; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

The third communication effort dimension included in the communication ecology framework is organisational contacts, which consists of the information that is disseminated in contact between citizens and organisations. Such activities may overlap with interpersonal contacts, as a citizen often discusses information received from an organisation with peers or family, during or after the organised activities.

Organisational contacts mentioned in the studies ranged from very structured, such as meetings with the authorities, to more unstructured, such as groups for sports or leisure activities. Structured organised meetings between authorities and voluntary immigrant organisations or other organised activities, such as religious gatherings, school meetings, or associations activities, were mentioned as important sources in all three countries (Ekblad et al., 2021;

Ojwang, 2020; Skogberg et al., 2021; Skogheim et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

Several types of unstructured meetings between health authorities and citizens were also mentioned in the samples. One such type of meeting was visits to healthcare institutions or participation in school or group leisure activities, during which information could be gathered and discussed and later forwarded to peers (Ekblad et al., 2021; Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021). Another type of meeting, mentioned in Brekke (2021b), was authorities' outreach activities in Norway, such as stands in public places and giving information door-to-door in the community.

Vulnerable language minorities' experiences of pandemic communication

RQ2 focused on which mediated, interpersonal, and organisational communication activities citizens in vulnerable groups experienced as well-functioning and which communication did not work. The results below are presented in the same order as previously.

Beginning with mediated information (i.e., content gathered from media sources) from authorities in the country of residence, citizens experienced several issues with content gathered directly from authorities' online channels (such as websites or social media). The problems were related to the information provided by the authorities and the language used.

Ekblad and colleagues (2021) found in a Swedish sample that information in the country's main language was difficult to understand due to the complexity of the messages, and Gele's research team (2021) mentioned equivalent results for information from authorities in general in Norway. Brekke (2021a) mentioned that Norwegian material translated into minority languages included symbols that were difficult for citizens with non-Norwegian cultural backgrounds to interpret.

Storstein Spilker and colleagues (2021) found that translations were sometimes difficult to find, of poor quality, or did not include the most current information. Furthermore, in some cases, minorities distrusted the sources behind the published material (i.e., the authorities) due to previous experiences living in conflict areas (Brekke, 2021a; Gele et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the Norwegian sample in Madar and colleagues' (2022) study listed health authorities' websites as the most important source of information. Ojwang (2020) reported that, in Finland, while authorities' online sources were not seen as the most useful source of information, they were the most trustworthy. Another Finnish study, by Skogberg and colleagues (2021), reported that 75 per cent of their sample had found adequate information via such information sources. Regarding citizens who had gathered mediated information from health authorities in their former home country, a study by

Finell and colleagues (2021) showed that one-third of Finnish minorities thought that this information was useful.

Mediated authority outreach strategies more directly aimed at residents belonging to vulnerable language minority groups, such as SMS messaging or information posters in building staircases, were experienced as positive in Finland, where the recipients of SMS messages felt more secure (Finell et al., 2021). Skogheim and colleagues (2021), in Norway, mentioned more critical views, for example, that SMS content was difficult to understand and should have been provided in more languages. Storstein Spilker and colleagues (2021) reported that information posters in building staircases were seen as positive, as they conveyed the seriousness of the situation.

Several studies reported that information from traditional mass media news outlets and their social media, or similar online channels, was seen as very relevant, trustworthy, or important (Ojwang, 2020; Madar et al., 2022). For instance, Skogberg's team (2021) reported that approximately 90 per cent of their sample thought that information found in Finnish media, and two-thirds thought that content in foreign media, was adequate. Skogheim and colleagues (2021) also reported that Norwegian minorities had followed the country's news media during the Covid-19 pandemic more than before. On the other hand, a Finnish study (Finell et al., 2021) found that some minorities experienced the information provided by mass media as exaggerating the risks of the pandemic.

A specific form of mass media outlet in the country of residence, such as regional radio channels or web pages operated by minority groups, were seen as very important (Brekke, 2021a; Sheikh et al., 2021). This was due to both providing content in their main language and being more culturally relevant.

Regarding information provided by mass media in former home countries, participants in a Swedish study (Ekblad et al., 2021) experienced these as both positive and negative. Information reached them faster via these channels, but reports were sometimes seen as more dramatic. A Norwegian sample also mentioned the risk of news from outside the country not being in line with the current national recommendations (Storstein Spilker et al., 2021). Some samples also saw social media usage in general – without specifying the type of usage – as central. However, citizens also highlighted the need for caution when interpreting content, as it may include false information (Ojwang, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2021).

Moving on to interpersonal communication strategies, as stated in the section above, such communication with family, friends, colleagues, or other peers was seen as very important during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many benefited from younger peers with better language skills who translated and provided more relevant cultural meaning to the content (Brekke, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021). However, the Norwegian sample in Storstein Spilker and colleagues'

(2021) study experienced that – since the available authority information was sometimes of poor quality or did not include the most current information – it was difficult to initiate grassroots information-spreading initiatives.

Information ambassadors – community representatives with the task of distributing pandemic information to citizens – were a form of peer communication that citizens experienced as relevant for both interpersonal and organisational communication. Several authors (Brekke, 2021a; Finell et al., 2021; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021) listed traits that, according to their samples, describe a good ambassador or similar voluntary key person: having knowledge of and respect for the local minority community; having insight into how society in general and the healthcare system works; and having good language skills.

Brekke (2021a) underlined the importance of such ambassadors for bridging the gap between hard-to-reach citizens and authorities. However, a negative aspect mentioned by Storstein Spilker and colleagues' (2021) Norwegian sample was that, at least when such work was voluntary, too much responsibility was put on the ambassadors or volunteers to coordinate the activities and keep themselves updated with the most current developments.

The third subcategory of communication strategies was organisational efforts, when information is disseminated between the citizens and organisations. One such form was structured organised meetings arranged, for example, in the local community. A Finnish sample saw such meetings as relevant for enabling collaboration with the authorities (Finell et al., 2021). Swedish minorities mentioned that activities where minority organisations acted as a go-between were positive, as such actors were easier to trust (Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

Furthermore, some in the samples also experienced unstructured meetings – such as being in contact with organisational representatives at healthcare institutions or when participating in school or leisure activities – as a relevant form of communication. These unstructured meetings were seen as beneficial because they provided opportunities to engage in direct discussion regarding central topics with varying organisations (Ekblad et al., 2021; Ojwang, 2020; Skogheim et al., 2021).

The above-mentioned citizen information ambassadors were, in some studies, highlighted as central figures in organisational communication strategies. Brekke (2021a) mentioned organised meetings with citizens arranged by a local association and in which ambassadors participated. They were seen as very useful, as the forums included both spreading information to minority citizens and feedback about how to further improve communication from the authorities, with ambassadors acting as mediators.

Best practices for pandemic communication with vulnerable language minorities

RQ3 focused on which pandemic communication efforts for vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden have been suggested as best practices by scholars and experts in the field. This part of the results section thus aims to add professional communicator viewpoints to the experiences of minority citizens – while it does not aim to give a complete description of all the information-spreading activities that have been conducted by authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section follows the same layout as the first part of the results, going through the best practices within mediated, interpersonal, and organisational communication efforts. Suggestions for the best practices related to interpersonal and organisational communication were, in the reviewed studies, usually presented together and are thus presented in the same section below.

Before presenting communication efforts within the three communication ecology framework categories, some general conclusions can be made. Documents showed that the key for best practices in future minority communication seems to be to combine established routines with new, proactive, and creative ways of reaching out. Proactive planning should be done together with representatives for central minorities in the region to design well-working communication strategies *with* them, not only *for* them (Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021). Planning in advance is central, as relevant strategies and stable technology need to be in place and ready to use in the acute phase of a crisis and include an infrastructure that allows rapid updating during crisis developments (Esaiasson et al., 2020; IMDi, 2020; Rolig, 2021; Skogberg et al., 2021).

Regarding mediated communication efforts, identifying the specific language-related needs, preferred media usage patterns, and cultural conditions (e.g., authority trust issues) of the regional minority groups is important. This enables communicators to choose the most relevant mediated channels (e.g., social media, easily accessed web pages, leaflets) and formats (e.g., short texts, videos, animations, audio-based material), and to identify trustworthy “faces” to convey messages (e.g., minority representatives) (Brekke, 2021a, 2021b; Finell et al., 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Orderud et al., 2021; IMDi, 2020; Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Furthermore, chosen mediated channels, such as dedicated web pages or social media accounts, should be easy to find and navigate (Madar et al., 2022; NOU, 2021). To avoid misunderstandings, communicated messages should include simple and clear language and symbols and, when possible, relate to everyday issues relevant to the target group (NOU, 2021; Rolig, 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

However, minorities are heterogeneous groups, and what works in one minority community may not necessarily work in another (Diaz et al., 2020; IMDi, 2020; Svenonius, 2020). Close contact with the groups is therefore needed. Furthermore, resources may become a problem as “hidden” work related to translating information, mapping receiver group needs, and constructing culturally relevant information directly addressed to the groups can be costly and time-consuming (Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Regarding the other dimensions in the communication ecology framework, interpersonal and organisational communication, experts in the reviewed studies clearly see a need for more focus on such strategies in the future. Several studies highlighted the relevance and strength of collaborating with the networks of minority citizen volunteers and ambassadors that arose during the pandemic (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Brekke, 2021a; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Mangrio et al., 2020; Orderud et al., 2021; IMDi, 2020; Valeriani et al., 2020).

Engaging and working together with influential representatives from the communities, as well as community organisations such as nongovernmental organisations or religious groups, has many benefits. Studies have shown that such efforts allow for translated, culturally or linguistically addressed, and honest two-way information strategies (e.g., regarding preventive measures or regional virus exposure in the subgroup) (Ekblad et al., 2021; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Orderud et al., 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, Ekne Ruud, & Søholt, 2020; Valeriani et al., 2020) and for distributing information equally across citizen subgroups (Ekblad et al., 2021; Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020).

Furthermore, studies showed that collaboration is central to avoid content or strategies where minorities are stigmatised (Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021), to allow for coordination of suitable face-to-face campaigns in the community (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Brekke, 2021b; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Sigurjónsdóttir et al., n.d.), and to increase trust towards authorities among minority communities (Skogheim, Orderud, & Ekne Ruud, 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021).

However, volunteer communication work comes with limitations regarding, for instance, readiness to act swiftly when needed, capacity to design well-working information content, and level of knowledge about the topics communicated. It is also difficult to get objective data regarding the reach of, and response to, information disseminated by volunteers or information ambassadors, and the benefits of voluntary efforts need to be weighed against needed resources (Bjørnbæk et al., 2021; Diaz et al., 2020; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021).

Therefore, authorities must have the official responsibility and coordination of interpersonal and organisational collaboration efforts and outreach infrastructures. They should include minority citizen representatives and organisations in a way that takes these limitations into account but still allows

for flexibility and thinking “outside the box” (IMDi, 2020; Indseth, Brekke et al., 2021; Svenonius, 2020; Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå, 2021). The economic resources needed for such collaboration and voluntary work should also be proactively planned for (Diaz et al., 2020).

Conclusions

Drawing on communication ecology frameworks (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Broad et al., 2013) in contexts of complex vulnerability (Bowleg, 2020), this chapter investigated how language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis built on secondary data: a systematic review of scientific research published before March 2022.

We used the communication ecology framework approach, as this allowed communication efforts to be divided into three defined subgroups (Broad et al., 2013; Liu, 2022) as well as positioning efforts in relation to a specific communication goal: “to meet the goal of coping with the threat and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Houston, 2021: 888). We examined which communication activities were included in the communication ecology frameworks of vulnerable language minorities (RQ1) and which activities they experienced as well-functioning or requiring further improvement (RQ2). Moreover, we summarised scholarly and expert suggestions for best practices regarding pandemic communication efforts targeted to these groups (RQ3).

The analysis of vulnerable language groups’ own experiences showed that mediated activities were the most common communication effort referred to in the data. In general terms, such information provided by authorities or mass media was considered relevant and trustworthy. However, access to and use of public health information mirrored the socio-political position of receivers in society. This was linked to proficiency in the majority language, patterns of media use, and a sense of trust and societal belonging. Thus, the results supported previous research on the vulnerable position of minorities who lacked contact with social networks or had limited skills in the country’s main language (Ahmed et al., 2020; Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Storstein Spilker et al., 2021).

Our study showed that translated public information in one’s mother tongue provided broader access but did not resolve issues of sender legitimacy and cultural barriers to information. Language barriers seemed to make news media from former home countries and in one’s mother tongue important for many groups. Interpersonal contacts emerged as significant and easily accessible, referring to face-to-face contacts as well as social media interaction.

Particularly in a social media context, receivers also appeared as senders, blurring the traditional sender-receiver nexus. However, bridge-builders with a more explicit information-distribution mission received specific attention in the

studies. These communication ambassadors were well-received by communities since they simultaneously possessed language skills, local knowledge, and societal expertise. Despite that, the division of responsibility between bridge-builders and authorities was sometimes unclear or unspoken.

Organisational contacts were conceived of as important for receiving information at local levels, ranging from formal and informal authority-arranged outreach activities to bureaucratic or institutional encounters and ad hoc communal gatherings. The benefit of organisational and interpersonal contacts was that the interactional nature of these communication efforts enabled the asking of questions and clarification of uncertainties in a different way than mediated activities.

Our results illustrate how the complexity of crisis communication in the current media landscape (Austin et al., 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008) was experienced in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic among vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Competing voices (Sellnow & Veil, 2016) affected citizens' understanding of the crisis, both via the varying sources used for taking in information from authorities and the mass media and due to citizens themselves acting as both receivers and senders of information (Houston, 2021; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018).

Finally, in addition to examining the latest bottom-up experiences, we analysed recommendations for the future as proposed by researchers or experts in the reviewed publications. The key to future best practices seems to be combining established communication routines with novel, proactive, and creative outreach activities, planned together *with* community representatives, not only *for* them. That way, traditional distinctions between not only sender and receiver, but also between professional communicators and citizens, are increasingly fluent and shifting.

Future research should thus focus on how collaborations and interactions between authorities and citizens may take form and in which ways the actors can benefit from each other. Furthermore, scholars should ensure that the vulnerable minority perspective is included in studies. The results from our analyses illustrate this need to broaden the scholarly perspective: Only 13 documents were identified that included the minority viewpoint.

To conclude, when addressing vulnerability in the public realm, it is important to ask who is vulnerable, why they are vulnerable, and what they are vulnerable to (McLaren et al., 2020). While age and certain medical conditions have caused health-related vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic, being a linguistic minority has also emerged as a disadvantaged social category. Indeed, while efficient communication strategies must recognise language diversity, communication formats, and the legitimacy of the senders, it is also important to secure socioeconomic resources for the wider population to enable equal participation in an increasingly digitised public life. Hence, in the context of the Covid-19

pandemic, linguistic vulnerability describes a complex set of processes and circumstances that creates disadvantages in relation to health communication. These complex vulnerabilities highlight the need for diversified communication initiatives to secure equal access to information and social and healthcare services (Rambaree & Nässén, 2020; Zechner & Romakkaniemi, 2020).

Some limitations regarding the results of this chapter should be pointed out. As the results are based on secondary analyses of published studies and other documents, they are limited by the data inclusion choices made by the original authors. Furthermore, parts of the analysed content were, in the original publications, described in general or neutral terms, while the surrounding text allowed for interpretation. We carefully reviewed how we interpreted such material, but it is reasonable to reiterate that less information was available about such content in the original texts. Thus, interpretation of this chapter's results should have these limitations in mind.

References

- Ahmed, F., Ahmed, N. E., Pissarides, C., & Stiglitz, J. (2020). Why inequality could spread Covid-19. *The Lancet Public Health*, 5(5), E240. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30085-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30085-2)
- Austin, L., Fisher Liu, B., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498>
- Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Kim, Y., & Matei, S. (2001). Storytelling neighborhood: Paths to belonging in diverse urban environments. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 392–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365001028004003>
- Bjørnbæk, M., Hussaini, L., & Fretheim, A. (2021). Kartlegging av kommuners tiltak for å få innvandrere til å teste seg: en kvalitativ studie av et utvalg norske kommune [Mapping community strategies for increasing testing among immigrants: A qualitative study among a selection of Norwegian communities]. In T. Indseth (Ed.), *Covid-19 blant innvandrere i Norge: vurdering av tiltak og erfaringer fra felt* [Covid-19 among immigrants in Norway: Evaluation of strategies and experiences in the field] (pp. 37–45). Folkehelseinstituttet.
- Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2005). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- Bowleg, L. (2020). Evolving intersectionality within public health: From analysis to action. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(1), 88–90. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.306031>
- Brekke, J. P. (2021a). Informing hard-to-reach immigrant groups about Covid-19 – Reaching the Somali population in Oslo. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35(1), 641–661. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab053>
- Brekke, J. P. (2021b). Kartlegging av årsaker til forskjeller i smitte og sykdom i innvandrermiljøer [Mapping reasons for varying levels of contagion and illness in immigrant areas]. In T. Indseth (Ed.), *Covid-19 blant innvandrere i Norge: vurdering av tiltak og erfaringer fra felt* [Covid-19 among immigrants in Norway: Evaluation of strategies and experiences in the field] (pp. 46–67). Folkehelseinstituttet.
- Broad, G. M., Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Ognyanova, K., Stokes, B., Picasso, T., & Villanueva, G. (2013). Understanding communication ecologies to bridge communication research and community action. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 41(4), 325–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2013.844848>
- Diaz, E., Norredam, M., Aradhya, S., Benfield, T., Krasnik, A., Madar, A., Juarez, S. P., & Ros-tila, M. (2020). *Situational brief: Migration and Covid-19 in Scandinavian countries*. Lancet Migration. <https://www.migrationandhealth.org/migration-covid19-briefs>

- Drefahl, S., Wallace, M., Mussino, E., Siddartha, A., Kolk, M., Brandén, M., & Andersson, G. (2020). A population-based cohort study of socio-demographic risk factors for Covid-19 deaths in Sweden. *Nature Communications*, 11, 5097. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-18926-3>
- Ekblad, S., Savlin, P., Albin, M., & Georgelis, A. (2021). *Experter inifrån. Trångboddhet i förhållande till covid-19. Information, barriärer och egna strategier. En intervjustudie i Järva [Experts from within. Overcrowding and Covid-19. Information, barriers, and applied strategies. An interview study in Järva]*. Stockholms läns sjukvårdsområde. <https://via.tt.se/pressrum/slo/mi?publisherId=3236162&item=document-3248150>
- Esaiasson, P., Johansson, B., Gheretti, M., & Sohlberg, J. (2020). *Kriskommunikation och segregation i en pandemi: Hur boende i utsatta områden informerade sig om coronaviruset våren 2020 [Crisis communication and segregation in a pandemic: How residents in vulnerable areas informed themselves about the corona virus in the spring of 2020]*. Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg. https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2020-09/84.Kriskommunikation_och_segregation_i_en_pandemi_0.pdf
- Finell, E., Tiilikainen, M., Jasinskaja-Lahti, I., Hasan, N., & Muthana, F. (2021). Lived experience related to the Covid-19 pandemic among Arabic-, Russian- and Somali-speaking migrants in Finland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 2601. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052601>
- Gele, A., Sheikh, N. S., Kour, P., & Qureshi, S. A. (2021). Uptake of Covid-19 preventive measures among 10 immigrant ethnic groups in Norway. *medRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.11.24.21266682>
- Gilpin, D. R., & Murphy, P. J. (2008). *Crisis management in a complex world*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195328721.001.0001>
- Hayward, S. E., Deal, A., Cheng, C., Crawshaw, A., Orcutt, M., T. F. Vandrevalla, Norredam, M., Carballo, M., Ciftci, Y., Requena-Méndez, A., Greenaway, C., Carter, J., Knights, F., Mehrotra, A., Seedat, F., Bozorgmehr, K., Veizis, A., Campos-Matos, I., Wurie, F., McKee, M., Kumar, B., & Hargreaves, S. (2021). Clinical outcomes and risk factors for Covid-19 among migrant populations in high-income countries: A systematic review. *Journal of Migrant Health*, 3, 100041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2021.100041>
- Holmberg, V., Salmi, H., Kattainen, S., Ollgren, J., Kantele, A., Pynnönen, J., Järvinen, A., Forsblom, E., Silén, S., Kivivuori, S. M., Meretoja A., & Hästbacka, J. (2022). Association between first language and SARS-CoV-2 infection rates, hospitalization, intensive care admissions and death in Finland: A population-based observational cohort study. *Clinical Microbiology and Infection*, 28(1), 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmi.2021.08.022>
- Houston, J. B. (2021). Covid-19 communication ecologies: Using interpersonal, organizational, and mediated communication resources to cope with a pandemic. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 887–892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992837>
- IMDi. (2020). *Forslag til tiltak for å redusere Covid-19-smitte blant innvandrere [Suggestions for actions to diminish Covid-19 infections among immigrants]*. The Directorate for Integration and Diversity. <https://www.imdi.no/globalassets/dokumenter/ekspertgruppe-rapport--forslag-til-tiltak-for-a-redusere-covid-19-smitte-blant-innvandrere.pdf>
- Indseth, T., Brekke, J. P., Gele, A., Ezzati, R. T., Elgersma, I., Kjøllesdal, M., Vold, L., & Fretheim, A. (2021). Sammendrag og læringspunkter [Summary and learning points]. In T. Indseth (Ed.), *Koronapandemien og innvandrerbefolkningene: vurderinger og erfaringer [The corona pandemic and immigrant populations: Evaluation and experiences]* (pp. 5–12). Folkehelseinstituttet
- Indseth, T., Grøslund, M., Arnesen, T., Skyrud, K., Kløvstad, H., Lamprini, V., Telle, K., & Kjøllesdal, M. (2021). Covid-19 among immigrants in Norway, notified infections, related hospitalizations and associated mortality: A register-based study. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 49(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494820984026>
- Jauhiainen, J. S., & Tedeschi, M. (2021). Healthcare of undocumented migrants. In J. S. Jauhiainen, & M. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Undocumented migrants and their everyday lives – the case of Finland* (pp. 131–148). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68414-3>
- Keskinen, S., Skaptadóttir, U. D., & Toivanen, M. (2019). Narrations of homogeneity, waning

- welfare states, and the politics of solidarity. In S. Keskinen, U. D. Skaptadóttir, & M. Toivanen (Eds.), *Undoing homogeneity in the Nordic region: Migration, difference, and the politics of solidarity* (pp. 1–17). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315122328>
- Labberton, A. S., Godøy, A., Elgersma, I. H., Heine Strand, B., Telle, K., Arnesen, T., Nygård, K. M., & Indseth, T. (2021). SARS-CoV-2 infections and hospitalizations among immigrants in Norway – significance of occupation, household crowding, education, household income and medical risk. A nationwide register study. *MedRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.05.04.21256575>
- Liu, W. (2022). Disaster communication ecology in multiethnic communities: Understanding disaster coping and community resilience from a communication resource approach. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 15(1), 94–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2020.1854329>
- McLaren, L., Masuda, J., Smylie, J., & Zarowsky, C. (2020). Unpacking vulnerability: Towards language that advances understanding and resolution of social inequities in public health. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 111, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-019-00288-z>
- Madar, A. A., Benavente, P., Czapka, E., Herrero-Arias, R., Haj-Younes, J., Hasha, W. H. W., Deeb, G., Møen, K. A., Ortiz-Barreda, G., & Diaz, E. (2022). Covid-19: Access to information access, level of trust and adherence to health advice among migrants in Norway. *Archives of Public Health*, 80(15), preprint. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-237066/v1>
- Maestriper, L. (2021). The Covid-19 pandemics: Why intersectionality matters. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 26(6), 642662. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.642662>
- Mangrio, E., Paul-Satyaseela, M., & Strange, M. (2020). Refugees in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic – The need for a new perspective on health and integration. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8, 574334. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.574334>
- NOU (Norges offentlige utredninger) [Norway's public investigations]. (2021). *Myndighetenes håndtering av koronapandemien: Rapport fra Koronakommisjonen* [How authorities handled the corona pandemic: A report by the Corona Commission]. Office of the Prime Minister. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2021-6/id2844388/>
- Ojwang, F. (2020). Deconstructing socially constructed subtle prejudices during the first wave of Covid-19 Pandemic among immigrant population in Finland. *Sociology Study*, 10(6), 267–279. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5526/2020.06.002>
- Orderud, G. I., Ekne Ruud, M., Wiig, H., & Rose Tronstad, K. (2021). *Covid-19: Informasjon, etterlevelse og vaksinasjon blant innvandrere – en kunnskapsoppsummering* [Covid-19: Information, compliance, and vaccination among immigrants – a summary of the state of knowledge]. Oslo Metropolitan University. <https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2761809/2021-11.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Perreault, M. F., Houston, J. B., & Wilkins, L. (2014). Does scary matter? Testing the effectiveness of new National Weather Service tornado warning messages. *Communication Studies*, 65(5), 484–499. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.04.006>
- Rambaree, K., & Nässén, N. (2020). 'The Swedish strategy' to Covid-19 pandemic: Impact on vulnerable and marginalised communities. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2), 234–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516602620936048>
- Reuter, C., & Kaufhold, M. A. (2018). Fifteen years of social media in emergencies: A retrospective review and future directions for crisis Informatics. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12196>
- Rolig, L. (2021). *Viranomaisviestintää terveystieteissä: Espoon kaupungin toteuttama monikielinen kriisiviestintä koronapandemian aikana* [Authority communication in a health crisis: Multilanguage crisis communication in Espoo city during the corona pandemic] [Unpublished master's thesis, University of Helsinki, Finland].
- Rostila, M., Cederström, A., Wallace, M., Brandén, M., Malmberg, B., & Andersson, G. (2021). Disparities in coronavirus disease 2019 mortality by country of birth in Stockholm, Sweden: A total-population-based cohort study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 190(8), 1510–1518. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwab057>
- Sellnow, T. L., & Veil, S. R. (2016). Preparing for international and cross-cultural crises: The role

- of competing voices, inclusivity, and the interplay of responsibility in global organizations. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The handbook of international crisis communication research* (pp. 489–498). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sheikh, S. N., Storstein Spilker, R., Nordstrøm, C., Duahle, H., Tsige, S. A., Kour, P., Qureshi, S., Gawad, M., & Gele, A. (2021). Erfaringer fra felt: Perspektiver fra personer med innvandrerbakgrunn [Experiences from the field: Perspectives from people with immigrant backgrounds]. In T. Indseth (Ed.), *Koronapandemien og innvandrerbefolkningene: vurderinger og erfaringer* [The corona pandemic and immigrant populations: Evaluation and experiences] (pp. 107–125). Folkehelseinstituttet.
- Sigurjónsdóttir, H. R., Sigvardsson, D., & Oliveira e Costa, S. (n.d.). *Who is left behind? The impact of place on the possibility to follow Covid-19 restrictions*. The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council. <https://www.norden.org/en/publication/who-left-behind-impact-place-possibility-follow-covid-19-restrictions>
- Skogberg, N., Koponen, P., Lilja, E., Austero, S., Achame, S., & Castaneda, A. E. (2021). *Access to information, preventive measures and working conditions during the coronavirus epidemic – Findings of the population-based MigCOVID Survey among persons who have migrated to Finland*. Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. https://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/141067/TYO%202021_008_14042021.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y
- Skogheim, S., Orderud, G., & Ekne Ruud, M. (2020). *Informasjon og tiltak rettet mot innvandrerbefolkningen i forbindelse med Covid-19* [Information and actions taken towards the minority population during Covid-19]. Oslo Metropolitan University. <https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/handle/20.500.12199/6531>
- Skogheim, S., Orderud, G., Ekne Ruud, M., Søholt, S. (2020). *Informasjon og tiltak rettet mot innvandrerbefolkningen i forbindelse med Covid-19* [Information and actions taken towards the minority population during Covid-19]. The Directorate for Integration and Diversity. <https://www.imdi.no/om-imdi/rapporter/2021/informasj-on-og-tiltak-rettet-mot-innvandrer-befolkningen-i-forbindelse-med-covid-19---delrapport-2/>
- Skogheim, S., Orderud, G., Ekne Ruud, M., Søholt, S. (2021). *Informasjon og tiltak rettet mot innvandrerbefolkningen i forbindelse med Covid-19* [Information and actions taken towards the minority population during Covid-19]. The Directorate for Integration and Diversity. <https://www.imdi.no/om-imdi/rapporter/2021/informasj-on-og-tiltak-rettet-mot-innvandrer-befolkningen-i-forbindelse-med-covid-19---delrapport-3/>
- Spialek, M. L., & Houston, J. B. (2019). The influence of citizen disaster communication on perceptions of neighborhood belonging and community resilience. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 47(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2018.1544718>
- Storstein Spilker, R., Tsige, S. A., Nordstrøm, C., Duahle, H., Mohammed, N. S., Qureshi, S., Gawad, M., & Gele, A. (2021). Erfaringer fra felt: Målgruppene, foreløpige funn fra intervjuer med informanter i seks ulike innvandergrupper [Experiences from the field: Target groups, results to date from interviews with informants in six groups of immigrants]. In T. Indseth (Ed.), *Covid-19 blant innvandrere i Norge, vurdering av tiltak og erfaringer fra felt, delrapport 1* [Covid-19 among immigrants in Norway. Evaluation of strategies and experiences in the field. Interim report 1] (pp. 68–75). Folkehelseinstituttet.
- Svenonius, O. (2020). Vi talar men vem lyssnar? Kriskommunikasjon under pandemien [We speak, but who is listening? Crisis communication during the pandemic]. In E. Mittermaier, N. Granholm, & E. Veibäck (Eds.), *Perspektiv på pandemin: Inledande analys och diskussion av beredskapsfrågor i ljuset av coronakrisen* [Perspectives on the pandemic: Preliminary analysis and discussion on preparedness issues in light of the corona pandemic] (pp. 46–52). Swedish Defence Research Agency.
- Swedish Red Cross Skellefteå. (2021). “Det är inte pandemin som är problemet, det är segregationen och de ojämlika villkoren”: Coronapandemins påverkan på personer med begränsad svenskunnskap och förankring i lokalsamhället i Skellefteå kommun [“It is not the pandemic that is the problem, it is the segregation and the unequal opportunities”: The effect of the Corona pandemic on individuals with limited knowledge in Swedish and relation to the local

- society in the Skellefteå region*]. https://www.rodakorset.se/globalassets/ort2/vasterbotten/skelleftea/rodakorset_rapport_webb_2.pdf
- Valeriani, G., Sarajlic Vukovic, I., Lindegaard, T., Felizia, R., Mollica, R., & Andersson, G. (2020). Addressing healthcare gaps in Sweden during the Covid-19 outbreak: On community outreach and empowering ethnic minority groups in a digitalized context. *Healthcare*, 8(4), 445. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8040445>
- Waitzberg, R., Davidovitch, N., Leibner, G., Penn, N., & Brammli-Greenberg, S. (2020). Israel's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: Tailoring measures for vulnerable cultural minority populations. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 19, 71. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-01191-7>
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Factsheet October 2020: Vulnerable populations during Covid-19 response - Addressing vulnerability upfront in the WHO European Region*. https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/466108/Factsheet-October-2020-vulnerable-populations-COVID-19.pdf
- Zechner, M., & Romakkaniemi, M. (2020). Kriisissä hyvinvointivaltion merkitys korostuu [In a crisis, the role of the welfare state is accentuated]. *Janus*, 28(2), 113–114. <https://doi.org/10.30668/janus.95410>

Section V

Conclusions

In search of a Nordic model of crisis communication

Mark Blach-Ørsten,^I Øyvind Ihlen,^{II}
Bengt Johansson,^{III} & Jenny Lindholm^{IV}

^I Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark

^{II} Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway

^{III} Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of
Gothenburg, Sweden

^{IV} Political Science with Media and Communication, Åbo Akademi University,
Finland

Abstract

This concluding chapter summarises findings of the various contributions and points to new directions of research for the future. In the first part, we address the results from each of the book's three empirically based sections: section II) politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators; section III) media and crisis communication; and section IV) citizens and crisis communication. Furthermore, we discuss the relevance of a Nordic crisis management model based on these findings.

Keywords: the Nordic model, crisis communication, public authorities, media, audience

The Nordic model, crisis communication, and Covid-19

In this book, we have endeavoured to investigate similarities and differences in the unique communication and information environment that the Covid-19 pandemic created in the Nordic countries. In this final chapter, we summarise the book's findings, as well as point to new avenues of research. We first address the results in each of the book's three empirically based sections: section II)

Blach-Ørsten, M., Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Lindholm, J. (2023). Conclusions: In search of a Nordic model of crisis communication. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 349–361). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
<https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-16>

politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators, section III) media and crisis communication, and section IV) citizens and crisis communication. Based on the findings of the three empirically based sections, we return to section I of the book and discuss the relevance of a Nordic model of crisis management. Much like the discussions concerning a Nordic model in general (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Hilson, 2008; Skogerbø et al., 2021), a lingering question is whether such a thing exists.

Politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators

The seven chapters included in section II focus on communication from politicians, public health authorities, as well as lobbyists and industry actors. As illustrated in the introductory chapter, there is a wealth of literature on such aspects, particularly regarding politicians and public health authorities (Claeson & Hanson, 2021; Ihlen, Just, et al., 2022; Lilleker et al., 2021; Ratcliff et al., 2022). To a lesser extent, attention has been directed at lobbyists (Crepaz et al., 2022) and corporate actors (Guo & Cannella, 2021; Tench et al., 2022).

We first look at political actors, which are the focus of Chapter 3, parts of Chapter 4, and Chapter 5. In Chapter 3, Lars Nord and Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell inform us that while both the Norwegian and the Danish prime ministers used strong rhetoric to emphasise the gravity of the Covid-19 situation, the Swedish prime minister chose less harsh rhetoric. Despite these differences, Nord and Olsson Gardell still find that government communications in the Scandinavian countries displayed distinctive common features in their communication of the crisis, such as the need for national consolidation and exceptional political measures, in order to handle the situation effectively.

The focus on prime ministers continues in parts of Chapter 4 – by Joel Rasmussen, Øyvind Ihlen, and Jens E. Kjeldsen – with emphasis on prime ministers and their press conferences in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Here, one take-away also underscores the differences between the countries. Rasmussen, Ihlen, and Kjeldsen highlight that in the Swedish case, the prime minister and the political authorities almost seem to have left the reins of the country to the health experts, while in contrast, the Danish prime minister and the government clearly came forward as the decision-makers. The Norwegian practice could be located more towards the middle of this continuum between the health experts on the one side, and the politicians on the other (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020; Ihlen, Johansson, et al., 2022). In Finland, the government pronounced that their decisions were based on expert knowledge and scientific research, however, the legitimisation of policies still relied on “what is not yet known” (Parviainen et al., 2021: 241). One way to interpret this difference

is to connect to the distinction Siv Sandberg presents in Chapter 2, where she distinguishes between a West Nordic and East Nordic administrative tradition. The West Nordic model, typical for Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, builds on the idea of undivided power, where the dualistic East Nordic model restricts the influence of the government by granting administrative authorities considerable autonomy. This could explain differences found between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. However, what complicates this interpretation is taking Finland and Iceland into consideration. Political scientists have shown how “Denmark and Finland had politics-led pandemic management, which made use of more invasive regulatory instruments, while Iceland and Sweden employed expert-led pandemic management” (Christensen et al., 2022: 16). This obviously also pulls in another direction than what the postulate about a common Nordic crisis communication model would suggest.

In parts of Chapter 7 – by Jenny Lindholm, Tom Carlson, Frederike Albrecht, and Helena Hermansson – the focus on prime ministers continues, this time with a focus on their social media activity. Whereas Chapter 3 highlights the strong rhetoric of the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, Chapter 7 shows how Frederiksen primarily used her social media to communicate gratitude to the public and groups for various efforts and recognising the citizens’ hardships of coping with the crisis by expressing empathy and making her, according to the analysis, a supportive and compassionate leader. Frederiksen’s performance on social media is contrasted with the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, and it is noticed that he, in his social media activities, typically provided instructive messages, appealed for solidarity, and aimed at boosting the morale of the citizens. According to Lindholm and colleagues’ analysis, this gives the impression of a paternalistic leader talking *to* – not *with* – the people during the crisis. In addition to these differences, the social media analysis also finds several similarities between the prime ministers, mainly that across their communication, they had a common focus on the core actors of the Covid-19 crisis management: the government, governmental organisations, and health-related agencies.

Turning from political actors to the public health authorities, parts of Chapters 4–7 all address various aspects of their communication. A significant part of Chapter 4 focuses on the role and rhetoric of the health authorities in the Scandinavian countries, where Rasmussen, Ihlen, and Kjeldsen identify differences between the countries’ Covid-19 communications concerning themes of the danger of viral spread and how to define and manage risks to public health. Thus, they find that the Swedish government places the responsibility for infection-related decisions on the Public Health Agency of Sweden. The Danish and Norwegian governments, however, do not place the responsibility for infection-control decisions on a single authority, but can instead be said to engage in crisis management regarding the viral spread of the virus and

communicating a belief that the rest of society is robust enough to handle the implemented measures. Another difference between the countries is how the choices regarding the collective measures are justified. In this respect, the director general of the Public Health Agency of Sweden drew on a history of successful, voluntary vaccination programmes, advocating voluntary measures over collective restrictions. In comparison to this, the Norwegian communication strategy was most different. As opposed to justifying strategic choices with the help of everyday vaccination programmes, the Norwegian government justified extensive measures by drawing on a history of joint efforts in times of severe crisis, from World War II to the 2011 massacre on Utøya.

Continuing the focus on press conferences, Chapter 5, by Jens E. Kjeldsen, presents a rhetorical analysis that first and foremost highlights the introduction of a new type of press conference – the justifying press conference – whose purpose is to establish a rhetoric of urgency, which constitutes the spokespersons as legitimate leaders and endows them with authority. In this, there are clear similarities between the countries in focus (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden). The prime minister set the stage, and the minister of health informed about the situation and the measures taken. Then, in declining order of importance, the remaining representatives informed about the situation in their area of responsibility. In all three countries, the political authorities presented first, then the health authorities, and finally, in Denmark and Sweden, the police authorities.

Moving from press conferences to social media, parts of Chapter 7 also focus on how the health authorities perform on these platforms. One take-away from Lindholm and colleagues' analysis is that the Nordic health authorities show several interesting similarities in their communication on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic's first wave. All four health authorities interacted with other government agencies on Twitter. This low level of interaction with political officials may reflect the Nordic health authorities' need to not politicise their own communication by intertwining it with politicians' messages, and instead to manifest their role as professional civil servants. Lindholm and colleagues also find that the health authorities in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden frequently worked to provide their citizenries with instructions via Twitter. This focus on instructions by the Nordic health authorities during the first wave of the pandemic, argues Lindholm and colleagues, implies that they recognised the need for guidance among the public and specified appropriate actions to be taken or behavioural guidelines to be followed. Thus, the authors conclude that the public health authorities took a strong role as the government agency with the appropriate expertise to provide the public with guidelines.

Press conferences and social media are, however, not the only ways of communicating with the public. Indeed, more "classic" public information campaigns were also at the centre of the communication that the health authorities made use of during the Covid-19 pandemic. These campaigns are the focus of

Chapter 6, by Pernille Almlund, Jens E. Kjeldsen, and Ragnhild Mølster, where the authors conclude that the aim of the different campaigns was to indirectly regulate the population. Thus, the campaigns in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden made appeals to solidarity. The Norwegian campaigns achieved this through the Norwegian cultural concept of “dugnad”, while the Swedish campaigns focused explicitly on duty and how “we can come through this together”. In contrast, the Danish campaigns were somewhat different, as they only expressed solidarity through the explicit and often repeated sentence, “protect yourself and others by this good advice”. However, this sentence seems to be a clear reflection of the civic mindedness that was often mentioned by the Danish prime minister. Almlund, Kjeldsen, and Mølster’s analysis also highlights how the campaigns expressed the crisis management strategies in each country. In Sweden, the informational strategy represented in the campaigns primarily focused on facts and instructions on how to act, although part of the campaigns also used emotional appeals and humour to motivate citizens to continue their good habits. For example, the head of the Danish health authorities appeared in a humorous way as the strict authority in the videos. While there was little humour in the Norwegian strategy, it was also less authoritative than the Danish strategy. Accordingly, it left more space for the informational parts in a less instructive tone.

A final focus in section II concerns other import actors, such as unions or lobbyists. Thus, in Chapter 8 – by Finn Frandsen and Winni Johansen – the focus is on the industry level, and it is concluded that the Covid-19 crisis made visible the dynamics and interdependencies between the public sector, political level, and corporate crisis management. Highlighting the role of trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Frandsen and Johansen show that trade associations played a new role in acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, they did not only fulfil their traditional role but were highly visible in the media and to the public, and they were able to make themselves heard at the political level. They were also considered highly valuable actors and sources of information by journalists, politicians, and civil servants, as well as by their own members. In sum, trade organisations became central voices during the pandemic, and they communicated a lot compared with normal times, both internally and externally, and they even did campaigns to gain the attention of the public and show commitment to their members.

Looking at an equally influential group of actors, lobbyists, Wiebke Marie Junk shows, in Chapter 9, that based on a large survey of over 500 interest organisations in Sweden and Denmark, there is strong evidence to suggest that a higher level of affectedness by the crisis had a significant positive effect on the frequency of access to all lobbying arenas in both Denmark and Sweden. In this sense, Junk argues, the lobbying access in these two Nordic countries

during the pandemic can be seen as an instance of exchanges between interest organisations and different political gatekeepers that are adaptive to the changed circumstances during the crisis. Another take-away from Chapter 9 is that there is some evidence that organisations with higher staff resources enjoyed higher access during the pandemic. There is also limited evidence that some types of organisations enjoyed higher access than others. Thus, both Danish labour and professional organisations, as well as business organisations and firms, enjoyed higher access to the Danish bureaucracy after the outbreak of Covid-19 than did nongovernmental organisations.

Media and crisis communication

In section III, Chapters 10 and 12 both offer a focus on the news media and journalism role during the pandemic, while Chapter 11 focuses on disinformation and social media. While the latter has been the topic of much research and worry during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Larson, 2020), research in the former area is somewhat lacking, with some exceptions (e.g., Pollock & Vakoch, 2022; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Truedson, 2021).

The study in Chapter 10 – by Marina Ghersetti, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, and Sigrún Ólafsdóttir – is based on content analysis of news reports collected in Iceland and Sweden. The findings show that news reporting largely followed an informative discourse, and that health and economy were the dominant themes. Authorities in both countries relied heavily on experts to convey information, which was reflected in the news coverage. The findings also suggest that critical reporting on the implemented strategies and protective measures was limited, more so in Iceland than in Sweden.

The question of critical investigative reporting is also the focus of Chapter 12 – by Mark Blach-Ørsten, Anna Maria Jönsson, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir, and Birgir Guðmundsson – which looks at the meta-journalistic discourse on investigative reporting during a public health crisis in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. Despite different methodological approaches, Chapter 12 and Chapter 10 present some similar conclusions. In neither Sweden nor Iceland is the question of critical investigative reporting much in focus – at least not until sometime into the development of the pandemic, when questions were raised as to the news media being too uncritical of government dissensions. However, in Denmark, the question of investigative reporting was in focus from the first day of the pandemic, with some news media highlighting the need to tone down that type of journalism during a health crisis, and other news media arguing the direct opposite – that in times of national crisis, critical, investigative reporting was more important than ever. The media users, like the news media, were also split. Some lamented uncritical reporting, while other users criticised news media for being too critical in a time when the nation should stand together.

In Chapter 11 – by Jannicke Fiskvik, Andrea Vik Bjarkø, and Tor Olav Grøtan – the focus moves from legacy news media to social media. Thus, the authors present a study of the Norwegian discourse on Facebook and Twitter related to the issue of Covid-19 vaccines and compare the findings with existing studies on social media and Covid-19 in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. The results show that the overall picture was that the Norwegian health authorities enjoyed a high level of trust from the population, and that the openness and transparency of the authorities' crisis communication may have been important factors behind this success. The study also focuses on the public's perceptions and responses to the Norwegian health authorities' handling of the crisis and the communication of public figures on social media. Here, the study shows that over time there was a shift in moods and arguments, going from scepticism to optimism, to disappointment and critique. Fiskvik, Bjarkø, and Grøtan thus reveal a pluralism of perceptions, where Facebook and Twitter users both support and contest information about Covid-19 vaccines. Another study has pointed to how enlisting supporters in both legacy media and social media might be an important strategy for the public health authorities (Kjeldsen et al., 2021).

Citizens and crisis communication

In section IV, containing Chapters 13, 14 and 15, we turn to the question of crisis communication and the roles of citizens. Chapter 13 looks at the issues of citizens in terms of trust, a topic that was propelled to the forefront early in the pandemic (Devine et al., 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Johansson et al., 2021; Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021). Chapter 14 looks at citizens' news use during the pandemic (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Pedersen & Burnett, 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Chapter 15 investigates how vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the first year of the pandemic, something that was also much discussed beyond the Nordic region (Maldonado et al., 2020; Viswanath et al., 2020).

Using public opinion data from academic surveys and commercial opinion polls, Bengt Johansson, Jacob Sohlberg, and Peter Esaiasson, in Chapter 13, present several take-aways: first, that crisis and the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect provide governments and state agencies with favourable conditions in which to conduct effective crisis management; second, that national differences in crisis-management strategies have little influence on the presence of a rally effect (Sweden, which adopted a highly criticised Covid-19 strategy and faced high death tolls during the first year of the pandemic encountered a rally effect in line with those of its neighbours); and third, that the scope of the rally effect was incredibly broad, with rising support levels (and eventual declines) extending to government agencies that played no role in the crisis management. Thus,

Johansson and colleagues argue that the rally-around-the-flag effect extends throughout the whole of society, with threats from the outside world triggering unifying symbols of familiarity and security, and that all state agencies, regardless of their specific roles, seem to function as such symbols.

The trust extended to government and government agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic were also extended to legacy news media. In Chapter 14, Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe examine news use and find an image of Nordic citizens who are well served by their news media, also in a pandemic crisis, and with a continued central role for legacy news media as part of this navigation. Ytre-Arne and Moe's quantitative analysis finds familiar patterns of news use carried on, and sometimes accentuated, in times of crisis: Nordic news users fear fake news, but they seem to experience misinformation in their information environment to a lesser extent than elsewhere. Local news remains important, including during the pandemic, but the extent and selection depend on the preexisting position of local media in each country.

The book's final topical chapter – by Klas Backholm and Camilla Nordberg – focuses on communicating the Covid-19 pandemic to vulnerable language minorities in the Nordic countries. The chapter finds that for language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, mediated activities were the most common source of information, and that the information provided by authorities or mass media was considered relevant and trustworthy by the minority groups. However, their access to and use of public health information mirrored the socio-political position of the groups in general. Backholm and Nordberg also find that translated information in one's mother tongue provided broader access but did not resolve issues of cultural barriers to information. Other research seems to confirm this impression, with the degree of trust in the public health authorities varying between different groups as well (Madar et al., 2022).

A Nordic model of crisis communication?

Just ahead of the Covid-19 pandemic, the edited volume *Power, Communication, and Politics in the Nordic Countries* (Skogerbø et al., 2021) was published. In the final chapter, the resounding conclusion is that “it is hardly relevant to talk about a clear-cut Nordic model of political communication that highly contrasts other democratic states and their political communication systems” (Nord et al., 2021: 385). As should come across after reading this concluding chapter, the same could be stated for crisis communication. Still, as Nord and colleagues (2021) also conclude, there are some peculiarities that could be highlighted. The high levels of trust – both in relation to public authorities and legacy news media – might be particularly important, as it seems to contribute to resilience in the face of an adverse event like Covid-19. The argument that

the Nordic countries have had a particularly good starting point as being high-trust countries should be seen in relation to the existence of the Nordic model (Ihlen, Johansson, et al., 2022). Further, the low levels of polarisation and a strong sense of cooperation between institutions is also visible in the empirical chapters in this volume. This also contributes to a resilient society and can be interpreted as emanating from the Nordic model. Along this line were strong rally effects visible in all the Nordic countries, which can also be related to the low political polarisation of society and a consensus culture (Van Aelst, 2022). Thus, the high-trust society can be seen as a prerequisite for using pandemic rhetoric that emphasises personal responsibility and solidarity (dugnad, duty, and civic mindedness). Even if this might not be entirely unique for the Nordic countries, it fits well into the framework as being representatives of a state-oriented risk culture (Cornia et al., 2016).

Even while the Nordic countries share these features, as shown, their responses to an issue like Covid-19 vary. Political scientists point to the importance of “dissimilarities in governance arrangements and levels of politicization” related to managing Covid-19 (Christensen et al., 2022: 17), whereas we highlighted how earlier policy responses were more hierarchical in Denmark, Finland, and to some extent Norway, while more network-based governance was visible in Sweden and Iceland. Significant differences were also visible in the crisis communication, not least who functioned as “communicator-in-chief”. The prime ministers in Denmark, Finland, and Norway played a more central role in communicating the pandemic compared with their colleagues in Iceland and Sweden, where public health experts from responsible authorities played a more important role. We also found differences in the styles of communicating on social media from the prime ministers and the rhetoric from public authorities.

The crisis communication systems in the Nordic countries seems to have worked quite well, both in terms of informing the citizens of how to protect themselves and persuading them to take the vaccine. Dissemination of pandemic information, using broadcasted press conferences, legacy media, public campaigns, and other channels was effective, even if there are some questions regarding reaching out to vulnerable groups in society, such as individuals with migrant backgrounds. Returning to the CCC (Citizen Crisis Communication) model (Odén et al., 2016) presented in the introduction, the first function of crisis communication focuses on survival capabilities of crisis communication. Looking at the results in this volume, we are willing to claim that crisis communication in the Nordic countries strengthened citizens’ capability to protect themselves from Covid-19. The second function – the extent to which crisis communication strengthened the capability of holding those responsible accountable – might be more questionable. There has been a debate in the Nordic countries about deficits in accountability mechanisms, both in terms of governance but

also related to crisis communication, where the role of the news media has been questioned. Too much emphasis is said to have been devoted to disseminating information from authorities and not enough on scrutinising powerholders, exposing wrongdoings, or investigating consequences for disadvantaged parts of the population, including minority groups. The empirical analyses in this book seem to support this conclusion – at least in the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the third function, where crisis communication should strengthen citizens' social capabilities, the focus is on renewal and recovery. This perspective has been visible in some chapters, where speeches from the prime ministers seem to have filled this function, but also in social media use by the Danish prime minister, where she recognised citizens' hardships of coping with the crisis and thanked citizens and groups for their work. However, it is hard to determine whether this function has been sufficient.

Missing pieces and avenues for future research

An initial ambition of this book project was to provide research comparing *all* of the Nordic countries. We must admit that we only succeeded halfway with this goal, with, as frequently seems to be the case, a heavy emphasis on the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Hence, the Icelandic experience remains under-researched in many regards, not to mention that we lack perspectives from the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Åland, and Sápmi.

Most of the book has focused on the crisis management and communication of politicians and public health authorities, but here too more could be done, not least building on more comparative approaches including more countries and autonomous territories and regions. Furthermore, a question remains: How does the Nordic region compare with other regions or countries? While several of the chapters, including this concluding chapter, have alluded to differences, we would call for rigorous, empirical-based work to avoid leaning on the tradition of Nordic exceptionalism (Bengtsson et al., 2014). Some research has nonetheless contrasted the low levels of politicisation in the Nordic region with the situation in the US and elsewhere, and how this has led to support for Covid-19 vaccines in all but a few segments of the population (Wollebæk et al., 2022).

A host of different communicative challenges arise for public health authorities, and we do have some knowledge about how uncertainty was communicated (Kjeldsen et al., 2022), the role played by transparency (Ihlen, Just, et al., 2022), and how public health authorities attempted to strengthen their trustworthiness rhetorically (Offerdal et al., 2021). Still, here too more needs to be done in terms of exploring such communicative challenges more in depth, as well as adding a focus on other rhetorical aspects.

Additional research on particular actors during the Covid-19 pandemic is another possible focus. For instance, it would be worthwhile to have a stronger, empirical focus on the role played by nongovernmental organisations, not least among the minority population (Brekke, 2021). Additionally, case-oriented work could be conducted to get a better grasp of how certain business actors were lobbying to get exemptions from Covid-19 regulations (Raknes, 2023).

Finally, what also seems to be missing in the volume is a historical comparison. How did the public health authorities work this time around, compared with, for instance, what they did during the swine flu pandemic (Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2019)? Anecdotal evidence from interviews with communication officers in the Norwegian Institute of Public Health indicates how the negative effects of the swine flu vaccine was a lingering concern of the institute's employees.

All in all, however, we would like to maintain that the present volume has contributed valuable insights into how crisis communication works in the Nordic region. Insights that we believe are valuable to take into concern in preparing for the next pandemic or societal crisis of a certain magnitude.

References

- Andersson, U., Bergman, M., Bohlin, G., Brounéus, F., Dahlgren, P., Ekdahl, E., Ghersetti, M., Johansson, B., Morton, D., Sundén, E. S., Widholm, A., Östlund, E., & Truedson, L. (Eds.). *Journalistik i coronas tid [Journalism in the age of corona]*. The Institute for Media Studies. https://mediastudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Journalistik-i-coronans-tid_sammanslagen_webb.pdf
- Bengtsson, Å., Hansen, K. M., Hardarson, O., Narud, H. M., & Oscarsson, H. (2014). *The Nordic voter: Myths of exceptionalism*. ECPR Press.
- Bjørkdahl, K., & Carlsen, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Pandemics, publics, and politics: Staging responses to public health crises*. Palgrave Mcmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2802-2>
- Brekke, J.-P. (2021). Informing hard-to-reach immigrant groups about Covid-19 – Reaching the Somali population in Oslo. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35(1), 641–661. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab053>
- Broersma, M., & Swart, J. (2022). Do novel routines stick after the pandemic? The formation of news habits during Covid-19. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 551–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932561>
- Christensen, T., Jensen, M. D., Kluth, M., Kristinsson, G. H., Lynggaard, K., Laegreid, P., Niemikari, R., Pierre, J., Raunio, T., & Adolf Skulason, G. (2022, October 2). The Nordic governments' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparative study of variation in governance arrangements and regulatory instruments. *Regulation & Governance*. Early View. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12497>
- Christensen, T., & Laegreid, P. (2020, May 22). Balancing governance capacity and legitimacy – How the Norwegian government handled the Covid-19 crisis as a high performer. *Public Administration Review*, 80(5), 774–779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13241>
- Claeson, M., & Hanson, S. (2021). Covid-19 and the Swedish enigma. *The Lancet*, 397(10271), 259–261. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(20\)32750-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(20)32750-1)
- Crepaz, M., Junk, W. M., Hanegraaff, M., & Berkhout, J. (2022). *Viral lobbying: Strategies, access and influence during the Covid-19 Pandemic*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110783148>
- Devine, D., Gaskell, J., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2020). Trust and the coronavirus pandemic: What are the consequences of and for trust? An early review of the literature. *Political Studies*

- Review, 19(2), 274–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920948684>
- Esaïasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2020). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from ‘the Swedish experiment’. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Guo, W., & Cannella, A. A. (2021). No need to know it all: Implications of Covid-19 for corporate communication research. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(5), 1421–1425. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12705>
- Hilson, M. (2008). *The Nordic model: Scandinavia since 1945*. Reaktion Books.
- Ihlen, Ø., Johansson, B., & Blach-Ørsten, M. (2022). Experiencing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway and Sweden: The role of the Nordic model. In R. Tench, J. Meng, & Á. Moreno (Eds.), *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic* (pp. 184–198). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669-17>
- Ihlen, Ø., Just, S. N., Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., Offerdal, T. S., Rasmussen, J., & Skogerbø, E. (2022). Transparency beyond information disclosure: Strategies of the Scandinavian public health authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Risk Research*, 25(10), 1176–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2022.2077416>
- Johansson, B., Sohlberg, J., Esaïasson, P., & Ghersetti, M. (2021). Why Swedes don’t wear face masks during the pandemic—a consequence of blindly trusting the government. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2), 335–358.
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Ihlen, Ø., Just, S. N., & Larsson, A. O. (2021, August 2). Expert ethos and the strength of networks: Negotiations of credibility in mediated debate on Covid-19. *Health Promotion International*, 37(2), daab095. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab095>
- Kjeldsen, J. E., Mølster, R., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Expert uncertainty: Arguments bolstering the ethos of expertise in situations of uncertainty. In S. Oswald, M. Lewinski, S. Greco, & S. Villata (Eds.), *The pandemic of argumentation* (pp. 85–103). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4_5
- Larson, H. J. (2020). A call to arms: Helping family, friends and communities navigate the Covid-19 infodemic. *Nature Reviews Immunology*, 20(8), 449–450. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41577-020-0380-8>
- Lilleker, D., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (Eds.). (2021). *Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in times of crisis*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Madar, A. A., Benavente, P., Czapka, E., Herrero-Arias, R., Haj-Younes, J., Hasha, W., Deeb, G., Moen, K. A., Ortiz-Barreda, G., & Diaz, E. (2022, January 4). Covid-19: Information access, trust and adherence to health advice among migrants in Norway. *Archives of Public Health*, 80(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-021-00764-4>
- Maldonado, B. M. N., Collins, J., Blundell, H. J., & Singh, L. (2020). Engaging the vulnerable: A rapid review of public health communication aimed at migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 1-2, 100004. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2020.100004>
- Nielsen, J. H., & Lindvall, J. (2021). Trust in government in Sweden and Denmark during the Covid-19 epidemic. *West European Politics*, 44(5-6), 1180–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1909964>
- Nord, L., Skogerbø, E., & Kristensen, N. N. (2021). Conclusion: Nordic political communication between change and continuity. In E. Skogerbø, Ø. Ihlen, N. N. Kristensen, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries* (pp. 385–396). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855299-19>
- Offerdal, T. S., Just, S. N., & Ihlen, Ø. (2021). Public ethos in the pandemic rhetorical situation: Strategies for building trust in authorities’ risk communication. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 4(2), 247–270. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.4.2.3>
- Parviainen, J., Koski, A., & Torkkola, S. (2021). ‘Building a ship while sailing it’: Epistemic humility and the temporality of non-knowledge in political decision-making on Covid-19. *Social Epistemology*, 35(3), 232–244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1882610>

- Pedersen, S., & Burnett, S. (2022). Women's use and abuse of the news media during the Covid-19 pandemic on Mumsnet. *Digital Journalism*, 10(6), 1098–1114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1967768>
- Pollock, J. C., & Vakoch, D. A. (Eds.). (2022). *Covid-19 in international media: Global pandemic perspectives*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181705>
- Quandt, T., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2021). The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1199–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996253>
- Raknes, K. (2023). *Lobbyspeak: Understanding the rhetoric of lobbyists* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oslo, Norway].
- Ratcliff, C. L., Wicke, R., & Harvill, B. (2022). Communicating uncertainty to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic: A scoping review of the literature. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2022.2085136>
- Skogerbø, E., Ihlen, Ø., Kristensen, N. N., & Nord, L. (Eds.). (2021). *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855299>
- Tench, R., Meng, J., & Moreno, Á. (Eds.). (2022). *Strategic communication in a global crisis: National and international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184669>
- Viswanath, K., Lee, E. W. J., & Pinnamaneni, R. (2020). We need the lens of equity in Covid-19 communication. *Health Communication*, 35(14), 1743–1746. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1837445>
- Wollebæk, D., Fladmoe, A., Steen-Johnsen, K., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Right-wing ideological constraint and vaccine refusal: The case of the Covid-19 vaccine in Norway. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 45(2), 253–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12224>
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2021). Doomscrolling, monitoring and avoiding: News use in Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 22(13), 1739–1755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2021.1952475>

This edited volume compares experiences of how the Covid-19 pandemic was communicated in the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic countries are often discussed in terms of similarities concerning an extensive welfare system, economic policies, media systems, and high levels of trust in societal actors. However, in the wake of a global pandemic, the countries’ coping strategies varied, creating certain question marks on the existence of a “Nordic model”.

The chapters give a broad overview of crisis communication in the Nordic countries during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic by combining organisational and societal theoretical perspectives and encompassing crisis response from governments, public health authorities, lobbyists, corporations, news media, and citizens. The results show several similarities, such as political and governmental responses highlighting solidarity and the need for exceptional measures, as expressed in press conferences, social media posts, information campaigns, and speeches. The media coverage relied on experts and was mainly informative, with few critical investigations during the initial phases. Moreover, surveys and interviews show the importance of news media for citizens’ coping strategies, but also that citizens mostly trusted both politicians and health authorities during the crisis.

This book is of interest to all who are looking to understand societal crisis management on a comprehensive level. The volume contains chapters from leading experts from all the Nordic countries and is edited by a team with complementary expertise on crisis communication, political communication, and journalism, consisting of Bengt Johansson, Øyvind Ihlen, Jenny Lindholm, and Mark Blach-Ørsten.



NORDICOM



Nordic Council
of Ministers

Nordicom is a centre for Nordic media research at the University of Gothenburg, supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

