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Media systems in “the other” Nordic countries and autonomous regions

*Studies of news media and journalism
in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Sápmi, and Åland*

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Introduction

Media systems theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2017) has been a productive theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between media and politics in a comparative perspective. Recent developments in the growing research field have suggested that the democratic corporatist media system model is not one-model-fits-all with regard to the northern European countries (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Nord, 2008; Ohlsson, 2015; Syvertsen et al., 2014). However, empirical studies of the media systems of the Nordic countries tend to have the larger Nordic countries – Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark – as their object, leaving us with little research on the smaller media systems in “the other” Nordic countries and autonomous regions. The grand question still to be answered is whether we can speak of *one* or *a* Nordic media system, or whether there are differences from west to east or from north to south? What has our shared Nordic history meant in relation to the development of our media systems, and are there differences between the smaller and larger Nordic countries? Are we as alike as we might think?

This special issue addresses media systems in these “other”, less researched Nordic countries and autonomous regions, specifically Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Sápmi, and Åland. The theoretical relevance is the testing and development of media systems theory. The empirical relevance of the special issue is not least to present more data and inquiry about the less researched parts of the Nordic region. This said, there might be a growing academic interest as well as capacity building going on in the area of media research in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Åland, and Sápmi in these years. Just a few years ago, the first doctoral thesis from the Department of Journalism at the University of Greenland (Illisimatusarfik), “Journalism in Small Societies: A study of Journalism Practice in Greenlandic News Media”, was successfully defended

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by Naimah Hussain (2019, see also 2020), and subsequently created public and political debate in Greenland. The range of articles in this special issue is promising in relation to the future of Nordic media research and hopefully inspires new researchers to contribute to this important field of research as well.

The idea of the special issue was developed in realm of The Nordic Media Systems Research Network established in 2018 and funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research (running until 2022). The primary focus of the network is knowledge exchange, but as it is difficult for researchers to meet and talk without developing new ideas for research, and as the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland were represented in the network alongside “the usual suspects” Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, this special issue became a natural spin-off of a recurring theme in the discussion: On the one hand, we are all comfortable and familiar in our shared Nordic identities, and talking about media and democracy across Nordic countries is easy and natural, as our institutions, policies, and histories are intuitively recognisable; on the other hand, when meeting in the network, we are at often struck with surprise and sometimes embarrassment of how little we actually know when it comes to the details and concrete facts about media, journalism, and politics of our neighbour countries, and the simple exchange of facts and current affairs in the media business of the respective countries is an important and valuable feature of the research network. With this special issue, we aim to broaden the insights from the research network to a wider research community, inviting everyone to learn more about what we provocatively have called “the other” Nordic countries. Hopefully, it is needless to say that the provocation is aimed at the research community and what we believe is our shared tendency to focus on the larger countries rather than the smaller countries (and the larger media rather than the smaller, by the way). Before presenting each of the articles in the special issue and discussing what they contribute to our understanding of “the Nordic media system”, we provide a short presentation of media systems theory and its recent development.

Media systems theory – state of the art

In 2004, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini published *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, which soon became a work of reference in media and communication studies. The book is based on a study of 18 countries in Western Europe and North America and investigates what political, social, and economic factors have meant for the development of news media and journalism in the respective countries. The theory has four dimensions: 1) the media market, where the analytical focus is on the historical development of mass media, the supply and demand of news media, media ownership, and so on; 2) political parallelism, which is the relationship between the media system and the political system, for instance, whether news media are officially or formally tied to political parties and the external and internal pluralism of the given country; 3) the degree of journalistic professionalisation, which considers structural factors such as the education and organisation of journalists, but also the ideals and professional norms of journalism in the given country and the professional autonomy of journalists; and 4) the role of the state, or how and to what degree a given state intervenes in the development of news media, for instance, with laws, policies, and regulations as well as direct or indirect funding. The four dimen-

sions make up the analytical framework for empirical investigations of the countries, which led Hallin and Mancini to find three overall media systems, or models of media systems, which they argue can explain the different institutional development and political role of the media:

- the polarised pluralist model, which includes Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France in southern Europe;
- the liberal model, characterising the media system in the UK, Canada, Ireland, and the US;
- and the democratic corporatist model, which includes the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the central European countries Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, and Belgium.

The three media systems are dynamic ideal types (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and as such we can expect changes over the years and differences in each media system between the countries. Hallin and Mancini (2004) find both signs of differentiation (from the political system) and de-differentiation (from the economic system) but conclude that the forces of homogenisation are so powerful in the Western world that media systems will increasingly converge towards the liberal model. The convergence thesis has since been supported (e.g., Boczkowski et al., 2011), discussed (e.g., Benson et al. 2012), and criticised (e.g., Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Rantanen, 2013). Furthermore, the theory has been developed in order to include other media systems (e.g., Chakravarty & Roy, 2013) and digitisation (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2014).

In 2014, Brüggemann and colleagues (2014) set out to test and qualify the media systems theory by analysing an impressive amount of empirical material including surveys, content studies, expert interviews, and document analysis. The authors found support for the media systems theory and the three models, but also identified a significant fourth model, the Nordic model, which is characterised by a high degree of public media support (see also Büchel et al., 2016; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Nordic scholars discussing media systems theory have also addressed the specific features of the Nordic countries. The strong position of public service media has been mentioned as one of the few remaining common features of Nordic media systems, while other characteristics of a Nordic model seem to be less articulated in recent years. Newspapers are noticeably weakened compared to previously, and links between political parties and the press are not as strong as before. Additionally, media market deregulations have taken place and political support for state interventions in media markets has declined (Nord, 2008; Ohlsson, 2015).

These recent developments in media systems theory leads to the overall question guiding this special issue, namely if we can (still?) speak of *one* or *a* Nordic media system, or whether there are differences from west to east or from north to south which are so distinct that it would be more precise to speak of plural Nordic media systems. What has our shared Nordic history meant in relation to the development of our media systems? Are there differences between the smaller and larger Nordic countries? Are we as alike as we might think? Before we can answer these questions, we need to present the articles contributing to this special issue.

The contributions in this special issue

The first article in the special issue offers a rare insight into the media system in the autonomous and self-governing region of Finland, Åland (population 30,000). In the article “Åland – a peculiar media system”, Carl-Gustav Lindén interviews three journalists, three politicians, and two local historians, revisits a survey from 2016 with 68 politicians, journalists, and local decision-makers, and analyses the current Ålandic media policy adopted in 2018, in order to find the specific features of the media system in Åland. Lindén finds, despite its small size, that Åland has “a diverse and complete offering of local media” but also points to a certain vulnerability and room for differentiation of editorial strategies in the newspaper market which are characterised by being controlled by a local media mogul.

The second article is about the media catering to the indigenous Sámi people (approximately 100,000) living in Sápmi – including northern regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia – who speak ten different languages. “A Sámi media system?” offers rich insight into a diverse media landscape, which the authors – Torkel Rasmussen and Inker-Anni Sara from Sámi University of Applied Sciences and Roy Krøvel from Oslo Metropolitan University – describe as the result of “tensions between the indigenous and Western worlds”. The article, which is mainly based on secondary analysis of existing research, suggests that the current media system in Sápmi might be labelled a hybrid model. On the one hand, the media system is characterised by a growing “Sámi cultural awakening”, where Sámi media and journalists are becoming more self-confident and the majority society is increasingly interested in the minority Sámi culture. On the other hand, the emerging Sámi media systems are still dominated by media policies, institutions, and practices in Norway, Finland, and Sweden, and by the large Nordic media companies.

Though vast in geographic territory, Greenland – the autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark – can also be considered a relatively small media system, with a population of around 56,000 people. In the article “Media policy in Greenland”, doctoral fellow at the University of Greenland (Ilisimatusarfik) and Roskilde University, Signe Ravn-Højgaard, traces the media policy paradigms in Greenland through investigation of media laws and whitepapers, media reports, and official inquiries, resumés, and minutes of parliamentary debates in Greenland and Denmark, as well as newspaper articles from 1861–2019. Ravn-Højgaard finds that media policy reflects the changes in the political system of Greenland, and thus falls in three periods: the colonial period (1861–1953), where media was run by the state and there was no explicit or formulated media policy; the county period (1953–1979), where media was perceived as a vehicle for education and cultural understanding between Greenlanders and Danes; and most recently, the home rule period (1979–), where media are regarded as an important instrument for preserving Greenlandic identity and minimising influence from Denmark. The article concludes that media policy in Greenland shares many characteristics with “the media welfare state” ideal (Syvertsen et. al. 2014), except the important characteristic that media policy in Greenland is more volatile, as it is most often the result of ad-hoc, issue-driven, and short-term political decisions.

The three following papers are about the Nordic island country Iceland, with a population of around 350,000 people. First, Birgir Guðmundsson from the University of Akureyri looks at one of the key characteristics of media systems investigating “Political parallelism in Iceland: Perceived media-politics relations”. Guðmundsson looks at po-

litical parallelism as perceived by politicians and the public, and his analysis is based on surveys of local and national politicians before the parliamentary elections in 2013, 2016, and 2017, the municipal elections in 2014 and 2018, and a national poll in 2015. Guðmundsson finds that although a market media system replaced the formal party press system in the late twentieth century, there are still considerable ties between media and politics. This leads to the conclusion that the specific form of the democratic corporatist model found in Iceland also resembles the liberal and Mediterranean models when it comes to the question of political parallelism.

Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, who defended his doctoral thesis at Goldsmiths University in 2019, focuses on routine political journalism in Iceland in his article “Superficial, shallow, and reactive: How a vulnerable small state news media covers politics”. Based on 50 semi-structured interviews with politicians and journalists combined with a survey of the Icelandic population, the article explores the perception of political journalism in the legacy news media. Ólafsson finds that journalists and politicians are in overall agreement, perceiving the coverage of politics as superficial and lacking in analysis and informed critique. The population also finds the coverage superficial and lacking in critical questions and investigative journalism. When asked about possible explanations, politicians and journalists pointed towards the smallness of the Icelandic media market and to the mainly commercial funding of the legacy news media.

Narrowing in on the population, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir from the University of Iceland studies “News consumption patterns in Iceland”. Based on a survey conducted in 2017, Jóhannsdóttir finds a pattern of news consumption in Iceland which very much resembles the patterns in the other Nordic countries, and thus in the democratic corporatist media system: News is widely consumed by the general public, and legacy media are still most people’s primary source of news, although increasingly accessed on new platforms. Online sites are Icelanders’ most popular main source of news, which are followed by television and then social media. And just as in the other Nordic countries, it is a relatively small minority who interacts with news online.

The final article in the special issue is “Particularities of media systems in the West Nordic countries”, co-authored by Signe Ravn-Højgaard, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir, Ragnar Karlsson from the University of Iceland, and Rógvi Olavson and Heini í Skorini from the University of the Faroe Islands. As the title and list of authors suggest, this article takes a comparative perspective on the West Nordic countries – the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland – based on secondary analysis of available research, reports, statistics, media accounts, and various other material. Analysing the structure of the media markets, the role of the states, political parallelism, and the journalist profession in all countries, the authors conclude that the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland overall fit well into the Nordic media model (Syvertsen et. al., 2014). The authors also suggest that the Nordic model should be supplemented with a size dimension as to fully include the West Nordic media systems, which are relatively more vulnerable and volatile due to their “micro-size”.

“The other” Nordic media systems: Same challenges, but more vulnerable

As the chapters in this issue show, the smaller states and autonomous regions in the Nordic area share many of the same basic characteristics of the bigger Nordic countries.

Their societies are based upon the idea of a well-functioning welfare state, as well as multiparty systems in a consensual democratic tradition where diverse interests have been rather successfully balanced. Media systems in all Nordic countries and autonomous regions also share common distinctive features such as relatively strong newspaper markets, strong public service media market positions, and media policies where liberal values of media freedom are mixed with some state interventions, for example press subsidies. These similarities can be found to a large extent everywhere in the Nordic region, regardless of country size and geographic position.

At the same time, it makes sense to focus on some basic differences between Nordic media systems with regard to size. This collection of articles on “the other” Nordic countries clearly illustrates that there is much more pressure on media systems in smaller states, and that they are much more vulnerable and sensitive to conditions imposed by private, political, or government interests. A basic conclusion that can be drawn from the contributions in this issue is that these kinds of external pressures stand out as a main explanation of why media systems in smaller countries and regions in some aspects deviate from the standard in the four biggest Nordic states.

The pressure may be based on the fact that media ownership concentration becomes a greater problem, the smaller the market is. This is particularly true for Åland, where a single person controls the newspaper market, but media ownership concentration is also a distinctive feature of the Icelandic media market. The role of the state has not been that important in Icelandic media policy, which has opened up for clientelism and closer links between political parties and the media. As some authors in this issue suggest, Iceland has clearly moved in the direction of a polarised pluralistic media system with a high level of political parallelism, and with journalism practices less professional and watchdog oriented, at least in comparison with the bigger Nordic countries.

Iceland broke early with Danish influence on the media sector, while both Greenland and the Faroe Islands, for obvious reasons, are still influenced by Danish media policy fundamentals, such as, for example, the arm’s length principle. However, these principles, based on nation-state conditions, are not always easy to successfully implement in very small and homogenous media systems. As observations from Greenland indicate, long-term media policy considerations are in fact most of the time replaced by ad hoc solutions under pressure from current developments.

Media systems in the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish regions of Sápmi are characterised by a variety of news media in Sámi language, both with regard to printed press and broadcast media. National governments have generally declared their support for Sámi media, as minority media are considered of high priority in media policy in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Despite such declarations, no independent media system exists in Sápmi, as national governments have total control of media policy, making media in the Sámi regions as vulnerable as media in the other smaller Nordic countries.

The overall discussion about the future of Nordic media systems has to a large extent so far been focused on the democratic corporatist traditions in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden and the possible resilience of national distinctive features in relation to international trends of globalisation, digitalisation, and commercialisation of media markets. This perspective is important, as a possible Nordic model may illustrate the limitation of the idea of homogenisation of media systems, as suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

The smaller countries and autonomous regions in the Nordics face similar challenges but are much more vulnerable to external pressure due to their smaller size. In order to strengthen independent media systems and professional journalism, Nordic media policy-makers probably need to pay more attention to the more critical media challenges in “the other” Nordic countries.

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