

## The role of journalism in a time of national crisis

Examining criticism and consensus in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic

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## The role of journalism in a time of national crisis

*Examining criticism and consensus in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic*

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### 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

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## 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](http://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 (Schneider 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 metadiscussion 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 “Coronationalism” (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.

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