The Media Welfare State

Published by University of Michigan Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36850

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Conclusion

This book has introduced the Media Welfare State as a concept connecting media systems with the Nordic model of society. The concept is based on analyses of media use, press structure, public service broadcasting, and commercial media and communications companies within the Nordic countries. In addition to our own analyses, we have based our understanding of the Media Welfare State on literature covering Nordic media. The Media Welfare State refers to principles that are more durable and consistent than specific regulatory measures and that influence media and communications across sectors and historical periods.

Through studies of the historical development of Nordic media, we found that four principles in particular were overarching and durable, labelling these the pillars of the Media Welfare State. The first pillar is a preference for organizing vital communication services in a way that underscores their character as public goods, with extensive cross-subsidies and obligations toward universality. The second pillar is a range of measures used to institutionalize freedom from editorial interference and self-governance in day-to-day operations of the media. Third, we identified a pillar of cultural policy that extends to the media in the form of content obligations and support schemes, aiming to secure diversity and quality. The last pillar is the preference for consensual solutions that are durable and involve cooperation between the main stakeholders: the state, communications industries, and the public (see table 1.1 and the appendix).

The studies in this book demonstrate that the media systems of the Nordic countries develop and change, while retaining key features. The period we have analyzed can be roughly divided into four phases: from the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the establishment of universal services in telecommunication and broadcasting; in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s with an expanding public service monopoly, the decline in the party press, and the introduction of press support; through the 1980s and 1990s with deregulation and introduction of commercial public service broadcasting; and digital and
convergent media services from the mid-1990s and onward. In every phase, we have discussed adjustments and renewals of the organizational principles that support the Media Welfare State, as well as pointing to the adaptability of policy principles and solutions in the face of new challenges.

In this conclusion, we synthesize our findings and discuss the applicability of the theoretical framework of the Media Welfare State. The conclusion is structured around three issues that correspond to the three main premises of the book. Following this introduction, part 1 is about continuity. In this part we discuss the premise that continuity is just as important as change in Nordic media and present evidence for continuity on both the level of policy principles and the level of empirical realities. Part 2 is about change. In this part we discuss how marketization, globalization, social fragmentation, and authoritarianism continue to pose dilemmas for institutions and policymakers and how these forces take new forms in the digital age. Facing these challenges requires that policy measures and principles be adapted yet again. Part 3 is about the Nordic as a unit of analysis. To what degree have our analyses supported the view that the similarities between the Nordic countries are more profound than the differences? Part 4 concludes the book with a short note on research, particularly on the use of the concept of crisis to describe the current transformations in media and communications systems.

Continuity and Adaptability

Media studies, and particularly media policy studies, tend to be more interested in change than stability. One key premise of the book is that the interest in continuity should be stronger within media studies. It is therefore of course important to study change, but without a parallel emphasis on continuity the results may well be skewed. Generally speaking, studies of continuity will enrich the field of media research and pave the way for more interdisciplinary studies; what are the stabilizing factors across sectors and institutions? Specifically, as we stated in chapter 1, we wished to test the argument that continuity is just as important as change within Nordic media in the digital age.

As we have studied it in the book, continuity can be summarized on two levels: the level of organizational or policy principles and the level of empirical realities. We argue that although concrete ways of making policy and organizing media are modified and changed, the principles and practices that guide policy are to a large degree reaffirmed, sustained, and strengthened in the digital age. We further argue that there is a high degree of continuity regarding the empirical realities of how the media systems operate, whether we are speaking of user patterns, institutions, or content.

Beginning with the principles or pillars, we have shown in the book that
universalism is a continuous principle in media policy-making. In our discussion of welfare state models in chapter 1, we pointed to universalism as a distinctive feature of Nordic welfare states from the very beginning—welfare provisions were set up not just as passive safety nets for the poor, but as a universal, high quality provision for all (Andersen et al. 2007; Esping-Andersen 1990). Universal access and a broad appeal have characterized Nordic media throughout their history, and the principle is strongly reaffirmed with the commitment to universal access to digital infrastructure (chap. 2).

There is also continuity regarding the principle of editorial freedom, which is described as the second pillar of the Media Welfare State. The long history of institutionalized press freedom—a freedom that is being respected—has been emphasized as a key characteristic of Nordic media (chaps. 3 and 4). This principle has been reaffirmed and extended to online media, in the sense that the mandate of the self-governing bodies and regulations has been extended. The connection between the first and second pillars is also discussed in the book. The concept of the socio-democratic information culture (Maier-Rabler 2008) links the principle of freedom of information with universal access to information and means of communication and sees both as preconditions for a working democracy.

Media policy has changed over the last decade, and economic and industrial policy goals have become more important, yet in the book we have shown the continued significance of cultural policy goals, the third pillar. Media and communications are still seen as vehicles to foster democratic and cultural involvement and participation, in addition to policy measures that aim to ensure that quality and diversity remain in place. Although their significance is reduced, press subsidies that aim to secure diversity in national, regional, and local press remain important parts of media regulation regimes (see chap. 3). Public service broadcasters continue to have strong political support, are granted a liberal regulatory framework, and continue to be obliged to promote national culture, as well as quality and diversity in output (see chap. 4).

Fourth, there is a continued tradition of cooperative and consensual policymaking. Consensual and cooperative policies have been important for turning Nordic countries into advanced information societies with high penetration and access to digital infrastructure, and there has been a shared commitment by all relevant stakeholders, both public and private, to actively use information and communication technology.

Even so, the fact that there is strong evidence of cooperation between public and private interests does not imply that frictions and conflicts are absent. Instead, our analyses have shown that concrete policy measures, such as the license fee and press support, are contested in some of the Nordic countries. Moreover, the discussions of media companies in chapter 5 illuminated how
commercial enterprises have a dual relationship with the principles of the Media Welfare State: in many instances, the companies benefit from the cooperative traditions but are also constrained by them, and as we have shown, some companies have openly confronted the collaborative principle.

Although specific policy measures are contested, our contention is that the overarching pillars remain important for guiding policy in the digital age. This argument is supported with empirical analyses, in which we find substantial evidence for continuity in the use, content, and operation of media and communication services.

A first key finding in the book is the continuity in user patterns. In chapter 2 we argued that media use in the Nordic region has been egalitarian, albeit with relatively small differences between societal groups, and with major overlaps in the use of specific media. Our analyses showed that such patterns remain important in the digital age. While the region ranks high on the indexes of information and communication technology penetration and use, and while the inhabitants across the Nordic countries are comparatively heavy users of online media, to a large extent the uses come across as a continuation of traditional patterns. More specifically, there is continuity in the high interest in news and information, both in offline and online versions.

Second, the empirical analysis has demonstrated a continued diversity in content. Overall, there has been strong development toward more entertainment in all media windows and outlets. Nonetheless, we have discussed how a large number of newspapers continue to present a great diversity of views—locally, regionally, and nationally—and how the content of public service broadcasters continues to be significantly more diverse than that of commercial counterparts. Furthermore, we have argued that a high degree of diversity continues in the digital age, seen, for example, in the way that public service broadcasters venture into new media and experiment with multiplatform production (chap. 4). Partly as a result of these expansions diversity is upheld in an online environment, because rather than undermining traditional forms of output, the new channels for information and news distribution expand and complement existing output.

A third item of empirical evidence for continuity in Nordic media is that traditional institutions remain strong. The public service broadcasters in all Nordic countries continue to occupy a central position and maintain authority as the national broadcasters, and they have a strong online presence (chap. 4). Traditional newspaper publishers have a strong presence in new media and have found ways to incorporate online journalism into existing practices. As demonstrated in chapter 5, key national media institutions have successfully adjusted their strategies to digital and global markets. For example, the Norwegian publisher Schibsted has expanded from a national and pan-Nordic
newspaper company into a large international conglomerate with a strong position in publishing and online classifieds (chaps. 3 and 5).

In sum, the book has pinpointed areas of continuity in media use, content, and institutions. Media companies tend to follow well-trodden paths confronted with new challenges, and user preferences do not change overnight. What we have also aimed to illustrate in the book, as well as in this summary, is the strong connection between continuity and adaptability. Continuity does not mean the absence of change, but rather that strategies and measures are adapted to new realities—within the framework of durable principles.

Importantly, the adaptability in the cited cases is not one-sided: it is not only the users and companies that adapt—regulators and the state also do so, partly facilitating the changes. While the strong influence of the state is often thought of as a distinguishing characteristic of Nordic media, we have argued that just as important is the Nordic states’ pragmatic relationship with private businesses and the ability to reform through a public-private mix. In many ways the role of the state comes more into focus in the digital age—not only as a regulator but also as a facilitator—which stands out as an important object of study for media scholars.

In the years following the liberalization of telecommunication and broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis in scholarship and debate was on the withdrawal of the state from traditional areas of regulation, though more recently this has been corrected with an increased scholarly focus on “The return of the state” (Jessop 2010; Grewald 2010; ICA 2013). An important question in the digital era is how state measures are modified and transformed yet again to handle new problems and challenges.

Regulatory Dilemmas in the Digital Age

Media policy does not appear out of nowhere, but is instigated in response to problems—whether real or perceived. In the book, we have argued that four forces in particular—marketization, globalization, social fragmentation, and authoritarianism—create problems, which in turn have triggered political intervention in the media system. These forces persist in the digital era and also occur in new forms. Responding to them requires ingenuity and creativity on the part of policymakers and institutions, namely: how to adapt and transform strategies and policy measures developed in the analogue era to be effective in a new situation? The question concerns how to instigate change, while retaining key features crucial to the public interest.

In this part, we begin with some illustrative dilemmas under the heading of marketization. The adoption of market principles in new areas has influenced policies, media systems, and the production and distribution of media
content. We have seen how Nordic media companies have exploited new market opportunities and expanded both inside and outside the region and how audiences have been given a greater choice and opportunities for media use. However, we have also pointed out how marketization potentially challenges the policy goals of the Media Welfare State. For example, the attention to profitable niche markets may induce digital gaps, and quality may spiral downward when media content is recycled on many platforms.

The perhaps most difficult dilemma associated with marketization is the question of how to fund journalism. Existing and traditional business models for journalism are under quite extensive pressure in the digital era (see chap. 3). Traditionally, funding models for media have relied on the media as a mixed suite of content in which the revenue collected pays for the entire package. With digitalization and convergence, this system is dissolving in both the press and broadcasting. We see a decoupling of advertising and editorial content, a decline in the sales of printed newspapers, and an intensified competition for advertising revenue from new actors who do not produce journalistic content (such as Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn). In broadcasting, the dissemination of content across multiple platforms blurs the line between public and commercial funding. In both publishing and broadcasting, a key issue for policymakers is how to adapt the policy measures in which public funding plays a part. Public support mechanisms such as the license fee and press subsidies are not easily transferred to the online environment, and they are also challenged and seen to distort competition by companies who do not qualify for state support.

From a historical perspective, a range of measures has been implemented to modify the impact of standardization and globalization. The Nordic public service broadcasters have been regarded in particular as vehicles of cultural defense, whereas the political intention to protect national culture and language has also legitimized policy measures in publishing, commercial broadcasting, and other media. With the emergence of conglomerates that operate both globally and in national markets, the demarcation lines between the national and international levels become more blurred. As Nordic media institutions enter the online media market, the services they offer are frequently related to expanding international players such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook. This provides opportunities for connecting with users in new ways, but also brings the institutions into a territory of difficult ethical, financial, and editorial questions. For example, the influence of Facebook is considerable, not least in the way that the social media network has become a communications infrastructure in its own right. The presence of expanding, global players residing outside national borders, without any formal or regulatory relationships with Nordic governments, further challenges traditional methods of
consensus-building and collaboration between public and private interests. The international players press for standardized regulatory frameworks that function in the same way across national settings and do not take part in the traditional forms of dialogue such as public hearings, formal and informal meetings, and open public debate.

A range of policy measures to combat social fragmentation has also been instigated in the Nordic countries, and in the book we have discussed the moderate class, gender, and ethnic differences. Moreover, both social structures and media user patterns have been egalitarian, and the Nordic populations have been culturally homogenous. Recently, two parallel developments have imposed changes: On the one hand, media output is becoming increasingly fragmented, not least through the endless choices and niche services offered by the Internet economy (Anderson 2006; Turow 2011). On the other hand, the Nordic population is becoming more pluralistic, both in the sense of being ethnically and culturally more mixed and because of a liberal information regime that allows a wide variety of perspectives to be expressed (chap. 2).

The Nordic liberal information regime, particularly in light of the increased social fragmentation, poses dilemmas for both institutions and regulators. Perhaps the most acute challenge for media institutions is how to control politically extremist expressions, especially in online debates and user-generated content. In the aftermath of the July 22, 2011, terrorist attack in Norway, which we have cited as a case in several chapters, questions have been raised regarding the need to protect society and individuals from threats and hateful content on the Internet. While the editorial strategy in some media has been to prohibit anonymous posts and intensify monitoring in online debates, there has essentially been no tightening of speech. States are usually criticized for overreacting to terrorism (e.g., Freedman 2008), but in a Nordic context the question that is publicly debated is whether online extremism is treated too lightly. While the dominant view is that the repression of speech produces intensified extremism and polarization, others claim that the opposite is the case. For example, the Norwegian philosopher Lene Auestad argues that after the terrorist attack in 2011, hate speech has actually become more visible in the Norwegian debate and argues that “by accepting the presence of hate speech we are changing the norms for what is acceptable to say” (Auestad cited in Simonnes 2013, authors’ translation). For regulators committed to media self-governance, the pressing question becomes how to respond adequately to hateful and extremist expressions, as well as how to secure the rights of minorities and safeguard the rights of all citizens.

A related dilemma can be discussed under the heading of authoritarianism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Nordic policymakers and publishers explicitly rejected the idea of state-controlled media as a part of an anti-authoritarian
struggle. From the Enlightenment onward, there was a struggle for rational
debate and against the power of the Crown and Church, and a liberal climate
gradually evolved in which just about everything was allowed in terms of the
criticism of magistrates, religious dogma, and other people’s beliefs. How-
ever, the combination of digitalization, convergence, and globalization makes
the Nordic liberal publishing approaches, in addition to the openness in the
socio-democratic information culture, more contested and complicated.

In the book, we have discussed the controversy around the Danish newspa-
paper Jyllands-Posten’s editorial decision to publish the Mohammed cartoon
drawings in 2005. The publication triggered protests and a political and
diplomatic crisis between the Nordic region and several Muslim countries,
particularly affecting Denmark. The conflict demonstrates how editorial de-
cisions and traditions may be accepted and understood by stakeholders and
long-term residents of one country, but may not be accepted by new residents,
as well as readers, listeners, and viewers in other parts of the world. The dif-
ferent ideals of press freedom have traditionally been part of separate national
media spheres, but as a result of recent trends of globalization and digitali-
zation, these spheres have increasingly merged. In the wake of the cartoon
controversy, several of the fundamental premises of the liberal information
regime were contested: it was demanded that the Nordic governments should
discipline the media in question, otherwise they would be treated as being
co-responsible; and it was demanded of the media that they respect religious
dogmas. As different ideals of press and editorial freedom clash in the digi-
tal media landscape, a significant question is how to balance the mechanisms
that legitimize such freedoms and those that challenge them.

How Nordic Is the Media Welfare State?

Rather than studying and comparing each national system, this book has ap-
proached the Nordic area as one region. This approach is based on the evi-
dence of a great similarity across the Nordic countries. Still, this type of uni-
fied Nordic approach is not very common. In this part of the conclusion, we
recapitulate evidence of national differences and similarities and pose the
question: how Nordic are the characteristics we have detected?

Identifying the Nordic region as a special case requires support on two
interrelated counts: the cases must be internally similar, and as a group they
must diverge from other countries and regions. We have argued in the book
that both conditions are met. However, this neither means that the Nordic
countries are identical, nor that the features of Nordic media and communica-
tions are unique to the region.

Many studies point to differences between the Nordic countries’ media
Conclusion

and communication systems, and there is also a tendency to criticize general models such as Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) for masking important national differences (Nord 2008; Strömbäck, Ørsten and Aalberg 2008; Kjær and Slaatta 2007; Nieminen 2013).

We agree that there are substantial and important differences within the Nordic region and have pointed to several in the preceding chapters. Compared to the other Nordic countries, for example, the Finns are less ardent cinemagoers, the Danes watch more television, the Swedes read less online news, and the Icelanders upload more of their own content online (chap. 2). Denmark and Iceland have fewer titles and fewer local papers, Norway does not have a tradition of free newspapers, and the system of press support is nowadays more marginalized in Finland than elsewhere in the Nordic region (chap. 3). In Iceland, the license fee for public service broadcasting was abolished in 2007, and the public service broadcaster, RÚV, also takes advertising. Finland has recently switched from a license fee to a broadcast tax, whereas in Denmark the license fee has been extended to online media terminals.

In the book, we have further acknowledged that the choice of methodology may disguise relevant variations (chap. 1). In several instances, we have had to base our observations on data that do not cover all the Nordic countries. To provide more depth, we have illustrated the discussion with cases from individual countries, which are not chosen as being representative, and it is also true that the distinct features of the smallest Nordic country, Iceland, do not play a large part in the book.

Despite these findings and shortcomings, our contention is that a Nordic perspective can provide new insights, both empirically and theoretically. Media structures, institutions, and user patterns display a set of common traits across national boundaries that are worth both exploring and explaining, and it seems that that national differences are more significant in specific policy measures than in overarching principles and empirical realities. Viewed from an international perspective, Nordic countries cluster on a number of indicators related to social outcomes—such as the degree of happiness, social trust, freedom of speech, leverage of information and communication technologies, and patterns of media use. In sum, this clustering emerges as a distinct pattern when the Nordic countries are compared with other countries and regions.

This leads us to the second part of the question: To what degree do the Nordic traits differ from those of other countries and regions? Through studies of media use, the press, public service broadcasting, and media companies we have shown that there are indeed a number of features where the Nordic patterns are similar to those of other countries.

For instance, chapter 3 showed that continental European countries ap-
pear on the top of press-freedom rankings together with the Nordic countries and that press freedom characterizes the Netherlands and Switzerland no less perhaps than Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. Many aspects of the media structure and media use in the Nordic countries correspond with the structures and use in countries with similar societal models. Not surprisingly, we find many similarities between the media organization and user patterns in the Nordic countries and in other countries classified as corporatist or social-democratic (chaps. 1 and 2).

However, it is interesting that the similarities with other countries are not consistent, but depend on which elements of the media system we are observing. In the book, we have also shown that in some respects Nordic media and communication patterns and institutions resemble those of very different systems. For example, in many ways, the Nordic structures of public service broadcasting are similar to those of the United Kingdom and Japan. Moreover, we have referred to surveys in which the digital communication infrastructures in the Nordic countries bear similarities to those of Luxembourg, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada, and the United States.

Consequently, our conclusion is similar to the conclusions that emerge in studies of welfare state variations: the Nordic countries have much in common with similarly wealthy Western societies, but have more in common with each other (Andersen et al. 2007, 14). To the degree that one can speak at all of regional media and communications structures, Nordic media constitute a distinct entity.

The Nordic countries cooperate extensively and have in many instances actively coordinated specific media policy measures. Yet, there is a certain taken-for-granted attitude to Nordic cooperation, and Nordic media managers and policymakers seem more inspired by developments elsewhere. For Nordic media companies, a key source of inspiration is the United States, a leading country in media innovation that hosts several of the largest enterprises in current global media markets (see chap. 5). For further research it is interesting to ask to what degree developments in the Nordic countries will remain synchronous and which of other countries’ media systems will develop along similar lines. In order to answer such questions, there is a need not only to compare the Nordic countries with other Western countries, but also to compare their media systems with systems beyond the West (e.g., Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010; Hallin and Mancini 2012a).

Crisis—a Final Note

In the study of media and communications, and not least in media policy studies, there is an emphasis on upheaval and disruption. The concept of cri-
sis is often used—both in the public debate and in scholarship—to describe how traditional institutions of media and communications are threatened by forces such as marketization and globalization. Studies of public service broadcasting have been informed by a “crisis discourse” for several decades (chap. 4), it has been commonplace to talk about a “crisis” in the newspaper industry (chap. 3), and there is a sense of crisis in the discussions over the fragmentation of the public sphere (chap. 2).

The concept of crisis is used in the public debate, but is also much referred to in media scholarship. We have ourselves used this and similar concepts (see, e.g., Syvertsen 1991; Moe 2003), yet we remain unsure of whether this is a fruitful term.

One reason for this is that the concept is rarely defined very precisely. The concept of crisis is often used rhetorically by media actors to, for example, mobilize public support for political intervention, subsidy, and protection, which requires a certain analytical distance on the part of researchers. Furthermore, there is a danger that dramatic concepts of this nature may mask how change is a normal aspect of media development, as forms of content, economic models, or modes of communication emerge and fade over time. The focus on dramatic upheavals may mask how changes occur to a different degree and at a different pace in different parts of the world.

Perhaps the most important reason why dramatic concepts should be avoided in studies of media change is that such concepts mask the possibilities for action. Crises are often understood as a form of structural breakdown, and the use of such terms downplays how different actors willfully choose different solutions and pursue different goals. We have shown how media companies have pressed for political change and in various ways taken advantage of new possibilities for profit, but also how such companies may be committed to nonprofit goals (chap. 5). An important argument of this book is that policy makers and institutions are resourceful, resilient, and adaptable to changing circumstances. Rather than a dramatic break with the past, there are a number of microdecisions that transform media and communications, as well as many possibilities for managing and reorienting both policymaking and strategy.

In this book, we have done empirical studies on media use, the press, broadcasting, and private companies. Theoretically, we found combining studies from political science and sociology with perspectives from media studies rewarding, as it enabled us to identify a set of similarities between the societal characteristics and the principles and practices of media policymaking. Nonetheless, the approach and the concept of the Media Welfare State remain tentative and need further elaboration and investigation.