

# Embracing narrative journalism in the Nordic countries

## Introduction to special issue

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Narrative journalism – understood broadly as journalism “that display storytelling techniques to report upon real-world events and situations” (van Krieken and Sanders, 2021, p. 1404) – has a long and proud tradition in the Nordic countries (Bech-Karlsen, 2007, p. 41). In recent years, however, the genre has gained renewed momentum in the region. Digitally born media such as Zetland in Denmark makes extensive use of the approach, but traditional print media, for instance Verdens Gang in Norway and Kristeligt Dagblad in Denmark, have also discovered the power of narrative and won international awards for their digital storytelling (Moestrup, 2022). Public service media such as Danish DR, Icelandic RÚV, and Swedish SVT experiment with style and digital elements in their narrative web docs, and narrative journalism also thrives in new print media such as the newly launched publications Atlas in Denmark (2010), Magasinet Plot in Norway (2011), and Filter in Sweden (2008).

But what is the state of research in narrative journalism? Internationally, narrative journalism has attracted some scholarly attention, not least due to the journal *Literary Journalism Studies* which has served as an arena for studies of the form since 2009 (van Krieken and Sanders, 2021), and the efforts of the journal's publisher, the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, which has organized conferences, published newsletters etc. In a Nordic context, practitioners of the form have reflected on its particular characteristics and qualities, for instance at the annual, ever-growing conference Fortellingens Kraft in Bergen and in a number of anthologies with prescriptive texts, interviews with practitioners, and examples of narrative journalism (Kinch-Jensen, 2001; Sønnichsen & Kramer, 2002; Dalviken, 2005; Hvid, 2007; Skjold,

2015; Vaaben, 2019). However, until now, narrative journalism still has not been the subject of unified research across countries and institutions in the Nordic countries, which is why, with this special issue, we take initiative to such a collaborative effort. The aim is not only to shed light on a form that is becoming more and more important – and debated – in journalistic practice, but also to promote a research agenda that increasingly attracts attention from scholars across Nordic research environments focusing on journalism, media, literature, rhetoric, etc.

In this special issue, you will encounter articles on narrative journalism from a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. Taken together, the articles cover both conceptual, empirical, critical, and educational issues.

A narratological analysis of journalism set in the future is done in the article by **Harald Hornmoen, Yngve Benestad Hågvar** and **Jørgen Alnæs**. By investigating reporting on the climate crisis, the corona pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, the authors provide an analytical approach that differentiates between stories *about* the future, stories *from* the future, and stories *evocating* the future.

**Cecilia Aare** presents a close reading of three books about gang criminality in Sweden. Using her own concepts of *narrative compassion* and *narrative empathy*, Aare shows how the books offer – and block – insights into characters such as gang members, victims, and family members. Thus, her study showcases how narrative journalism may qualify – and inhibit – public debate about pressing societal matters.

A critical look at the term storytelling is carried out by **Frank Harbers**. He examines the discourse on digital storytelling as journalistic innovation in the Netherlands. The analysis shows a one-dimensional and techno-centric focus where journalistic innovation is seen as a matter of mastering the digital affordances of new technological tools and platforms without questioning how this impacts journalism's professional ethics and cultural authority.

**Steffen Moestrup** and **Karsten Vestergaard** provide an educational approach in their article. They introduce the *Digital Story Model* and discuss student experiences of applying the model in the production of digital journalism. By drawing on an action research approach, the authors co-develop and test the model in an international classroom setting with 85 journalism students representing 35 countries.

**Rasmus Rønlev** and **Susanna Sommer** focus on the functions of the third-person narrator in narrative journalism. Adopting a rhetorical-narratological perspective, they show how third-person narrators may be more or less (c)overly in narrative journalism. In continuation of this, they argue that no matter how covert a third-

person narrator journalists choose to use in their journalistic narratives, journalists cannot evade their role and moral responsibility as the creative force *behind* the narrator.

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