

Exploring the boundaries of Nordic journalism: Introduction to special issue

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Keeping journalism socially relevant and financially viable is more challenging than ever. It might seem like a paradox, but in a time when news media is challenged by inadequate business models, precarious labor conditions and competition from platform companies, and contested by populist politicians, the public is consuming more news than ever before. The changing media landscape, technological platforms and structural conditions are influencing journalism, its practices and its roles in everyday life, society, culture, and politics—central topics when communication scholars gather at international and national conferences dedicated to media and communication research.

The NordMedia Conference 2021 was arranged in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. It was supposed to be held in Reykjavik, Iceland, but was ultimately held virtually. Naturally, the topics tended to focus on how journalists were covering the pandemic, but they also included studies on truth, disinformation and facts as well as technology in journalism in the form of AI and automation. The presenters were later invited to participate in this special issue, which celebrates Nordic scholarship and the *Journalistica* journal.

In this issue, we bring together three studies that each illustrate the current developments within Nordic journalism research along with a book review of a book on political communication in the Nordics.

Ethics and trust are common threads that run through the three articles published in this special issue of *Journalistica*. The articles cover very different topics—from podcasting as a genre, alternative media and comment moderation to ethics in local news media — and ethics and trust are recurring themes in the discussions. What constitutes as news today is increasingly blurred as it mixes with

commercial content (influencers and content marketing — commercial genres that look like news), opinions (comments appearing as news) or false and manipulated content (fake news or disinformation). Many people, especially young adults, get their news from social media, and the newsfeed does not differentiate between different types of content. News from respected newsrooms has the same design as rumors from a suspicious website. Thus, users have to pay more attention to differentiate between the trustworthiness of the information.

This blurring of content and genres is challenging for journalism's trustworthiness. The articles in this special issue touch on some of the challenges appearing as a result of this blurring despite the long tradition of strong ethical guidelines for journalism in Nordic newsrooms. Nevertheless, the users of Nordic news are still demonstrating high levels of trust, among the highest in the 45 countries of the Reuters Digital News Report 2022 track. Finnish news users report the highest trust in news (69%), particularly the news they use (75%), followed by Denmark (58%/63%), Norway (56%/63%), and Sweden (50%/56%). Iceland was not included in Reuters' survey.

One factor that can help maintain and strengthen trust in news in the Nordic countries is strong ethical practices in newsrooms. Since the early 20th century, Nordic newsrooms and journalism organizations have developed ethical guidelines for journalism that are continually updated to reflect developments in the profession and society at large:

- Norway: [Code of Ethics for the Norwegian Press](#)
- Sweden: [Rules of Professional Conduct](#)
- Denmark: [Press Ethical Rules](#)
- Finland: [Guidelines for Journalists](#)
- Iceland: [Rules of Ethics in Journalism](#)

Ethical guidelines and their practical implementation in the newsrooms can help Nordic journalists navigate the challenges emerging from the changing media landscape, competition from technological platforms and structural conditions influencing journalism. The articles in this special issue of *Journalistica* each offer a unique contribution to address some of these challenges.

The article **Freedom of expression or censorship of antisemitic hate speech? Editorial and audience perspectives on comment moderation in far-right alternative media**, written by Norwegian scholar Birgitte P. Haanshuus, explores how three prominent and controversial Norwegian far-right alternative media sites perceive and perform comment moderation and how editorial and audience

perspectives on the issue correspond. The overall aim of the article is to disclose whether editorial and audience perspectives, respectively, correspond to an interventionist or non-interventionist approach to comment moderation and whether and how the arguments for and against comment moderation comprise normative, strategic or legal considerations. Based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from alternative media, including editors and main moderators, and a strategic selection of comment sections from editorial articles from each site, the article argues that comment moderation is crucial for all actors who seek to obtain or protect their legitimacy, regardless of their (counter-) position in the public sphere. Despite being strong defenders of freedom of expression, the editorial staff of the alternative media sites acknowledged that comment moderation is necessary, similar to how mainstream media perceive the responsibility for handling online debates (Anderson et al., 2016; Ihlebæk et al., 2013). The article contributes valuable insights into the strategy of comment moderation in alternative media — through both interviews and analysis of comment sections — and finds that these oppositional media actors are not so alternative after all. The main question, the article argues, is thus not whether interventions should happen at all but rather where the boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable should be set.

In the article **The ethics of journalism challenged: The blurring boundary between local journalism and communications**, the five Finnish scholars Jaana Hujanen, Mikko Grönlund, Juho Ruotsalainen, Katja Lehtisari and Viljami Vaarala explore the future of ethics in journalism by primarily investigating the current and future relationship between journalism and communications. Based on survey responses from editor-in-chiefs, the authors present alternative scenarios of the journalism-communications relationship. Hujanen et al. (2022) argue that paid content such as native advertising, but also other forms of influences from communication and PR, has had a major influence on ethics in Finnish journalism, and the process of blurring boundaries between the two industries presents ethical concerns. Hujanen et al. argue that journalistic ethics are an essential boundary for professional journalism and discourses on the future of journalism fundamentally concern its ethics. They point out that journalistic ethical codes do not address how to relate to native advertising. Nevertheless, 44 percent of the surveyed editor-in-chiefs were unsure whether the guidelines for journalists, a central element of journalism's boundaries, need updating. This is similar to previous research, which found that specialized journalists such as data journalists show limited interest in formalizing their new practices

with regard to ethics in updated journalistic codes of conduct (Morini et al. 2022). At the same time, the results of Hujanen et al. (2022) indicate that Finnish editor-in-chiefs think audiences have a hard time distinguishing between journalistic content and other forms of content; audiences simply do not know the boundaries of journalism. Furthermore, PR content mimics journalistic content to make it look more professional and trustworthy, or municipalities and local authorities prefer to send out “news” through their own PR channels rather than turning to journalists.

One of the reasons why the Finnish case is interesting is that, in Finland, local news media, while strong, is dependent on advertising and subscriptions. However, citing research by Newman et al. 2020, the Finns have been found to be slightly less willing to pay for news than the residents of many other Western countries. This conundrum calls for local news media to be ever more relevant. As Hujanen et al. (2022) find, the future looks grim for local media in terms of ethics: while profits are going down, non-journalistic content is becoming more professionalized, and as “communications exploit professional journalism, the democratic function of news media deteriorates” (p.16).

In the article **Podcast — commentary journalism in a digital public**, Norwegian scholars Lisbeth Morlandstø and Birgit Røe Mathisen explore the genre of editorial commentary podcasts. This article is based on a case study of four editorial podcasts in 2020 and 2021: *Omadressert*, produced by *Adresseavisen* in Trondheim; *Nokon må gå*, produced by *Bergens Tidende* in Bergen; *Giæver og gjengen*, produced by *Verdens Gang* in Oslo; and *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, produced for a Scandinavian public body and broadcasted by the national broadcasting companies in Norway (NRK), Sweden (SR) and Denmark (DR).

The article builds on a text analysis of several podcast episodes and six interviews with people involved with the podcasts. Morlandstø develops a set of binaries to capture important dimensions of the differences between the podcasts. These binaries are:

- monologue vs. dialogue
- factual vs. personal
- reflexive vs. assertive
- intellectual discussants vs. expert

The findings show that commentary journalism in the form of podcasts has a dual purpose: publicity and advertisement. The article contributes insights into how the podcast format innovates the genre by moving it in a dialogical direction and, further, how this

development is grounded in both commercial and societal considerations. On the one hand, the article argues that podcasts bring audiences closer to the discussions, making reflections and explanations in the episodes more understandable and thus serving a democratic function. On the other hand, it argues that the columnists in the podcasts have increased their power by personalizing communication and combining podcasts and social media to become visible, famous and celebrated, rather than facilitating public debate. Such cross-platform persona construction (Usher, 2020, p. 14) transforms opinion-based journalism from an analytical, reflective act into a channel for an authoritative political influencer's focus on their own opinions.

The final article in this special issue is Jakob Linaa Jensen's review of the book *Power, Communication and Politics in the Nordic Countries* edited by Eli Skogerbø, Øyvind Ihlen, Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Lars Nord. The book was published most recently by Nordicom in 2021, and a previous version was published in 2008. The book investigates how political communication in the Nordics differs from the same communication in other areas of the world. Linaa Jensen (2022) argues that the comparative perspectives reflected in the book are particularly well suited for introducing researchers outside of the Nordics to the media systems and political landscapes in the Nordic countries. Linaa Jensen believes the book functions as a good introduction for readers outside of the Nordics.

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