

News media and elections in the Nordic countries

Introduction to special issue

MARK BLACH-ØRSTEN

Roskilde University

BENGT JOHANSSON

University of Gothenburg

This special issue was inspired by the fact that across the Nordic countries, new parties, new political issues and a recent pandemic had been the order of the day in the most recent national elections that took place in Sweden and Denmark in 2022. Both election campaigns were also conducted in the shadow of Russia's war on Ukraine. In both countries some of the same issues such as climate change, crime, energy and immigration policies played significant roles in the public debate and in the election campaigns. Likewise, in both countries, the interaction between legacy news media, alternative media and social media, as well as the interaction between the media agenda, the public agenda and the political agenda have been heavily debated. Against this background, we invited scholars to send in articles that focus on the role of journalistic news media in recent elections.

We accepted four articles that are jointly published in this special issue of *Journalistica*, two from Sweden and two from Denmark. The four articles together focus on four different and timely aspects of elections coverage: the role of alternative news media, the role of social media, political parties' relation to news media elections coverage and the role of the news media in the battle for issue ownership between political parties.

Thus, the article by **Johansson & Strömbäck** focus on how, in contemporary media environments, mainstream news media have become increasingly challenged by so-called political alternative media. The article compares election news coverage in political alternative media with mainstream news media, drawing theoretically on theories related to mediatization and structural bias on the one hand, and politicization and political bias on the other.

Empirically, the article investigates how election coverage in left- and right-wing political alternative and mainstream media differ in relation to traditional news media and to each other. The findings of the article suggest that alternative political media *do* function as an alternative to mainstream news media, but also to each other. In this way they offer a more politicized coverage of election campaigns.

The article by **Severin-Nielsen** addresses another recurring question in political campaigns, namely the role of social media. The focus of the article is to shed further light on politicians' campaign practices in a hybrid communication environment, and whether the introduction of social media has introduced new dynamics into election campaigns. The study does so through a case study of Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen (Social Democratic party) and opposition party leader Alex Vanopslagh's (Liberal Alliance party) social media campaigns and online news presence during the 2022 national election. The study finds that Frederiksen was more visible in the news during the election than Vanopslagh, but that social media was central in both campaigns. However, Vanopslagh received exposure on a broader set of social media and to a greater extent capitalized on the platform affordances, than Frederiksen.

The study by **Brolin and Nord** changes the focus from media to political parties. Thus, the study explores the perspectives of political parties regarding news media coverage in election campaigns. By analyzing official post-election analyses produced by Swedish political parties from 2010 to 2022, the study offers a novel approach to the study of political party views of news media. The findings largely support the arguments proposed by mediatization literature, highlighting the significance of media in party communication. Parties display eagerness to attract positive media attention while expressing regret over inadequate or negative publicity. More surprisingly, there is a lack of references to media bias in the reports, suggesting that the hostile media effect is not a major concern among Swedish parties.

The final article by **Blach-Ørsten and Eberholst** focus on the role of news media in the political parties' battle for ownership of the most salient issues in an election campaign. In multi-party systems like the Nordic countries, battle for issue ownership is especially fierce. The study contributes to election research by exploring party-issue linkage as an indicator of issue ownership for both political parties and political leaders in the two most recent national Danish national elections. Based on a large-scale content analysis of leading Danish news media, and using descriptive statistics, they find a clear shift in media salience of political issues from 2019 to 2022. This shift leads to changes in party-issue linkage for both political parties and

specific political leaders, especially regarding the most salient issues of the elections like climate and the environment and health and eldercare.

MARK BLACH-ØRSTEN

Professor
Department of Communication and Arts
Roskilde University
oersten@ruc.dk

BENGT JOHANSSON

Professor
Journalism, Media and Communication
University of Gothenburg
Bengt.johansson@jmg.gu.se