

The face of the newspaper

The positioning of Danish editors-in-chief in the public opinion space

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Abstract

This article investigates how Nordic editors-in-chief position themselves and their news organisations in the crowded public opinion space of the early 21st century. In addition to being managers, editors-in-chief act as the face of the newspaper, immersed in public negotiations over the authority of their organisation. Using positioning theory to explain the performative dimensions of the role, we present two case studies of prominent Danish editors-in-chief: outlining their trajectories in the opinion space and conducting comparative close readings of their inaugural performances on national television. Our analysis shows how the editors-in-chief performatively personify their newspaper, constructing distinctiveness by actively merging individual and institutional levels of journalism. This highlights the editor-in-chief as a central node, or resource, in the process of positioning news organisations in society. Operationalising the notion of positioning in future studies of journalistic actors could enrich scholarly understanding of their activities, influence, and significance in opinion formation processes.

KEYWORDS

editor-in-chief, editorials, newspapers, positioning, opinion journalism, intellectuals

Introduction

In today's competitive information and news landscape, editors-in-chief play a key role in positioning news organisations in the space of opinion (Drezner, 2017; Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). In times when the opinion-forming power of podcast hosts and social media influencers challenges that of established journalistic actors and institutions, the societal and cultural role of the editor-in-chief deserves renewed scholarly attention.

In simple terms, editors-in-chief are faced with two main tasks: managing the editorial staff on the one hand and deciding the editorial line and cultivating the public profile of their newspaper on the other. While much research has focused on the managerial dimension, few studies explicitly address editors' immersion in public discourse (Duffy, 2021), especially in a Nordic context.

Focusing distinctly on the public and performative dimension of the position, we approach editors-in-chief as opinion leaders engaged in perpetual competition for attention with other opinionators in a shared space of discourse. Editors-in-chief use different rhetorical strategies and engage in performative actions to position themselves *and* their newspaper in the hybrid media landscape as well as the broader cultural and political public sphere. They leverage their institutional affiliation and use their leading position as a platform to influence public opinion (see Hernando & Baert, 2020). At the same time, they promote, defend, and expand the influence and visibility of their newspaper via their individual positioning performances across media.

So far, positioning theory has yet to be adapted to the field of journalism studies. Inspired by the notion of positioning as it originated in social psychology (see Baert & Morgan, 2018; Harré, 2015; Lawson, 2022), we propose an operationalizable analytical framework to study the public positioning and performances of editors-in-chief.

To illustrate the applicability of the framework and shed light on the opinionated and performative dimensions of the editor-in-chief, we analyse the positional profiles of two prominent Danish cases, Rune Lykkeberg of *Information* and Martin Krasnik of *Weekendavisen*, both of whom have shaped their newspapers for almost a decade. The analyses are guided by a twofold research question:

How can positioning theory explain the public and performative dimensions of the editor-in-chief, and how can it be operationalised in a way that recognises the editor-in-chief as a distinct actor in the opinion space?

The positioning framework, we suggest, enables the scholarly recognition of the distinctiveness of the editor-in-chief. By focusing on the performative dimensions of two contemporary examples, the article aims to advance the theoretical understanding of the editor-in-chief as not only a key component in institutionalised journalism but also as a distinct actor in the wider opinion space (Duffy, 2021; Firmstone, 2019).

The Nordic media environment constitutes a unique context for studying this for two reasons. First, Nordic journalists, editors, and media owners of both public and private media typically possess a “welfare state of mind” (Ahva et al., 2017), characterised by a strong public service ethos and prioritisation of democratic responsibility over commercial thinking. Second, compared to, e.g., the US, the Nordic region is characterised by a sustained dominance of legacy news media in shaping political opinion formation. The influence of institutionally embedded actors like editors-in-chief appears relatively stable; they are losing less ground to online influencers than is the case in other regions (Newman et al., 2024).

We first outline the research context in which editors-in-chief have traditionally been studied. Second, we present a performative framework for the study of mediated positioning dynamics and our methodological case study design (Baert & Morgan, 2018). Third, we outline the professional and public trajectories of the two cases, illustrating how different positioning strategies and reputational qualifications shape their public practice as editors-in-chief. This serves as a context for comparative close readings of two key performances by the selected editors-in-chief on Danish national television. Via these close readings (Micu, 2021), we demonstrate how the cases represent different ways of occupying the position as editor-in-chief, merging public intellectualism and charismatic performativity with a journalistic ethos. The point of comparing the two is to show that different circumstances enable different positioning moves in practice, which bring about different performative profiles. In turn, the comparative approach serves to solidify the analytical framework by demonstrating its applicability beyond a single case (Yin, 2018).

In conclusion, we discuss how engagement with positioning theory in journalism studies may further develop the scholarly understanding of the relationship between news organisations and media personalities in the opinion spaces of the 21st century.

Editors-in-chief in the opinion space

Legendary US newspaper editors such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst have been the subject of numerous biographies, tracing their lives, professional achievements, and influence on Western journalism. Similarly, several biographies have been published about or by influential Danish editors, e.g., Viggo Hørup, Edvard Brandes, Henrik Cavling, and Børge Outze. Although such biographies belong to a contested genre in the writing of history (Sardica, 2013), including the history of news, they provide a bird's-eye view to the trajectories and positioning efforts of individual editors-in-chief and their contributions to past and present times' culture and society.

Sociological studies of journalism have examined editorial journalism as a distinct practice (Firmstone, 2019), but the editor-in-chief has mostly been approached as just another journalist or simply the newsroom manager (Duffy, 2021). In fact, the research literature often juxtaposes the role of the editor-in-chief as lead for "an editorial, opinion-forming organ" (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2011, p. 305) with the role of manager for a news business enterprise. In practice, these roles typically intertwine due to the hybrid nature of the modern newspaper as a professional *métier* and a commercial business, or an institution navigating the public sphere and the market (Andersson & Wiik, 2013; Kvalheim & Barland, 2019).

The prominence of the opinion-forming role or the managerial role depends on the profile of the news brand, e.g., elite, niche, or tabloid newspaper, and on the media systemic context (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Roughly speaking, news institutions leaning towards a liberal media model, characterised by market domination, the ideology of objectivity, and a news gathering approach, would likely favour the editor-in-chief's role as newspaper manager, while news institutions leaning towards a polarised pluralist model, characterised by commentary-oriented journalism, would favour the opinion-forming role more. News institutions adhering to the democratic corporatist model, like the Nordics, historically characterised by a party press but shifting towards a more professionalised, business leaning, and neutral approach during the 20th century (Hjarvard, 2010), typically mediate the two, necessitating a managerial perspective but also considering the freedom and expectations associated with an opinion-forming role.

Studies indicate that editors-in-chief are increasingly distanced from the publicist values of journalism due to an increased professionalisation of the managerial and organisational dimensions of the position (Duffy, 2021). While this has, to some extent, also been the case within the Nordic context (Andersson & Wiik, 2013), Nordic

news institutions still enjoy a high public trust (Newman et al., 2024) and are characterised by a strong “welfare state of mind”, i.e., a dedication to public service ideals first and commercial logics second (Ahva et al., 2017).

Tracing changes in editors’ way of thinking in five Swedish provincial newspapers, Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2011, p. 307) show, for example, that although the road to success of these newspapers differs, it partly lies in editors-in-chief performing as “the face of the paper in the community”, nurturing the distinct character of the newspaper, *and* being able to attract readers and advertisers as well as to modernise the outlets, i.e., in cultivating editorial and commercial interests in tandem over time. This highlights the mediating role and fundamental locus of the editor-in-chief at the intersection of several – sometimes conflicting – dimensions: the news organisation, journalism as professional practice, audience demands, and society (Duffy, 2021).

So far, there has been a main research interest in studying the managerial and commercial sides of the editor-in-chief in view of increased commercialisation and struggles for audiences’ attention in the news industry during the past decades, most recently amplified by digitalisation, platformisation, and audience metrics (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018).

To add a new perspective, moving beyond biographical accounts of noteworthy cases and beyond analyses of the balance between editorial–commercial dimensions, we study the editor-in-chief as a key contributor in the public space of opinion. We suggest positioning theory as a useful lens because it provides a spatial vocabulary for locating editors-in-chief in relation to other actors and entities in this dynamic space. Following Duffy (2021, p. 635), we perceive the editor as “one of the most significant and defining characteristics of journalism that gives it legitimacy as a form of cultural production”, crucial in distinguishing professional journalism from other forms of information and knowledge production, fashioned and distributed by the multiple agents populating the space of opinion today. Townsley (2016, p. 43) conceptualised the space of opinion as the “part of the public communicative infrastructure in which the elites of our huge, complex societies debate matters of common concern”. The space of opinion involves overlapping fields such as journalism and media more broadly, traditional political institutions and newer political actors and interest groups, but also the academic field and other cultural fields (e.g., publishing) (Townsley, 2016). The rise of social media and digital platforms have only amplified the range of voices that are today part of this opinion space – influencers, media provocateurs, media-made arbiters of taste (Kristensen & From, 2015; Rønlev & Bengtsson, 2022), etc. – who

speak from both within and outside of institutionalised news contexts and who challenge established notions of cultural authority. In this diverse space of opinion, the appointment of editors-in-chief with distinct profiles can be a useful strategy for elite news institutions to maintain their cultural authority and public status (Carlson, 2023).

Positioning the editor-in-chief

While positioning theory is typically associated with social psychology and the work of Rom Harré, it is also used in several other disciplines (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). Sociologist Patrick Baert (2018) has developed a distinct performative perspective on public intellectual positioning, and Baert and Morgan's (2018) performative framework is useful to analyse not only social interaction on a micro-level but also the performances of a wide range of socio-political actors in a public space of discourse, including editors-in-chief.

We adopt a definition of *positioning* as the discursive process in which individuals, groups, institutions, concepts, and phenomena are attributed various features and qualities, effectively locating them in relation to each other in the public opinion space (Baert, 2018). A position is a cluster of attributions which represent the identity of its occupant (Lawson, 2022). Accomplished through social and discursive practice, positions are relational, non-essential, and context dependent. Positions enable and constrain action, as they involve the verbalisation of internal and external expectations of their occupant in terms of ascribed capabilities and obligations (Kayı-Aydar, 2019).

In journalism, positioning efforts are mainly associated with the expression of views rather than news. In other words, objective news coverage does typically not bring about very efficient positioning in the space of *opinion*. The editorial has been one important opinion genre for editors-in-chief to intervene in sociopolitical issues, conveying the partisan views and collective identity of the news organisation, and potentially influencing public opinion (Firmstone, 2019). The editorial may shape public debates by swaying voters and political agendas, as well as steering the news agendas of other news outlets, thus constituting an important positioning tool of the news organisation in the broader public opinion space (Kahn & Kenney, 2002; McCombs, 1967).

Other opinionated genres, in which the *individual* voice, views, and positioning of the editor-in-chief become visible, in contrast to the collective voice of the editorial, include commentaries, analyses, and columns. Such genres have been foregrounded as part of turns

towards subjectivity (Steensen, 2017) and interpretation (Barnhurst 2014) in journalism in recent decades. Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish editors' own voice from that of the newspaper.

Opinionated genres have also migrated to first talk shows, debate programs, and magazines, and later podcasts and social media platforms, suggesting that the opinion making component of the editor-in-chief is cross-mediated (Newman & Gallo, 2019). While the editor-in-chief typically still (re)presents the ideological positioning of the news institution when involved in such media formats, the personal and performative dimensions are significantly accentuated as part of the broader trend of media personas being increasingly cross-mediated (Kristensen & From, 2015). This emphasises that in today's hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) the editor-in-chief serves not only as a manager and gatekeeper but also as the face of the newspaper, performatively immersed across platforms, genres, and formats.

Rooted in speech-act theory, positioning is defined as an effect of communicative action (Baert, 2018). Language, or communication more broadly, is inherently performative because it is used not only to say things, but to *do* things (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010). When editors-in-chief construct narratives of the world in editorials, columns, or interviews, they locate various entities in the opinion space, including themselves and their news organisation, e.g., when aligning themselves with certain values, juxtaposing those values with individuals and institutions (allies and adversaries), or diagnosing society by identifying pathological elements. Thus, positioning occurs as a mix of self-positioning and the positioning of others. Not all positioning is intentional, let alone within the control of editors-in-chief. Communicative contexts and the shifting involvement of peers, critics, and audiences afford different kinds of positioning (Baert, 2018). The editorial enables relatively unrestrained positioning moves due to its one-way communication. Conversely, talk show and podcast interviews and debates are inherently conversational and involve intermediaries such as interviewers and opponents, contributing with *their* positioning moves. In this context, the editor-in-chief is both an agent, doing the positioning, and a positioned party, being attributed various features (Baert, 2018).

As will become clear in the analysis, intellectual engagement beyond news and current affairs is one distinct way in which editors-in-chief can stand out. Through analytical and ideological interventions in public discourse, e.g., book publications, some editors-in-chief position themselves not only as noticeable individuals with strong opinions about day-to-day events, but as intellectuals preoccupied with agenda-setting on the level of ideas. By acting as a

public intellectual via their embeddedness in the institution of journalism, such editors combine the institutional and the individual perspectives (Johansen, 2021). They utilise journalism's well-established democratic position in Western societies and benefit from a stable access to a large readership to offset the alternativeness and diffuse nature of being a free-floating intellectual (Davis, 2008).

This practice, of being an “embedded intellectual” (Baert & Shipmann, 2013) within the institution of journalism, reflects several parallels between journalism and democratic public intellectualism as the two domains have similar core values, centred on autonomy, “speaking truth to power”, and defending freedom of expression (see Collini, 2006; Deuze, 2019; Hawkins & Keren, 2015).

However, the relationship between journalism and intellectualism is not entirely without problems. In a US context, McDevitt (2020) describes the relationship as “vexed”, suggesting a distinct anti-intellectual underpinning of journalism. “The trouble with antipathy toward intellect”, McDevitt (2020, p. 2) writes, “is that this sentiment is tangled up with democratic commitments, with journalism’s egalitarian ethos, its identification with ‘the public’, ambivalence toward experts, and pleasure in holding up the haughty and highbrow to ridicule”. Nonetheless, precisely because this is the case – or at least corresponds with a certain image of journalism, not only in the US – editors-in-chief with distinct intellectual profiles have opportunities to construct authority in domains typically less acceptable or accessible to journalists. Intellectualism, i.e., the public engagement with ideas beyond the realm of news, constitutes a source of cultural authority, which may in turn provide certain editors-in-chief with distinct positioning tools (see Johansen, 2021).

Although both journalists and public intellectuals are men and women of letters (Heynders, 2016), a crucial difference is that journalists are professionals, while intellectuals are said to respond to a calling (Saïd, 1996), ideally operating in a more abstract domain of ideas and sometimes even prophecies (Young, 2014). Therefore, the main challenge for editors-in-chief with intellectual ambitions is to balance the hands-on approach of journalism with the philosophical gravity of intellectualism.

Staging, rhetoric, and demeanour

To analyse how positioning takes place in practice, we expand Baert & Morgan’s (2018) performative framework. Originally developed to conceptualise the dynamics of public intellectualism, we shift the contextual focus to editors-in-chief, while also making the framework analytically applicable through the qualitative method of close readings (Micu, 2021). By updating the framework in this way, we

introduce a new heuristic tool to the field of journalism studies. The analytical framework for the close readings focuses on three dimensions: 1) staging, 2) rhetoric, and 3) demeanour.

Staging is equivalent to Baert's (2018, p. 229) concept of "framing", which denotes the setting of the scene of any given performance. We use "staging" to avoid conflation with framing theory. In relation to mediated performances and interventions, e.g., television interviews, social media posts, or books, staging components include the media brand (values, political orientation), the individual television program (title, genre, agenda), book titles, or publishers, which help to label the individual editor-in-chief's contribution. Additionally, as professional trajectories of editors-in-chief inform the staging of their performances, mapping their road to the position is crucial to understand the communicative context of their operations.

Rhetoric refers to the arguments used by (or to describe) the editor-in-chief, including the narratives which emerge from performative (inter)actions. The analytical (re-)construction of argumentation patterns generates useful insights into the types of reasoning and references that inform rhetorical positionings. Focusing on rhetoric also means studying editors-in-chief's use of logos, ethos, and pathos to persuade and resonate with their audiences (Baert, 2018). Some editors-in-chief appeal to logic and reason, avoid affect-driven arguments, and downplay their personal investment; others frequently refer to their own erudition and credentials, while still others appeal to the emotions and indignation of their audiences.

Finally, *demeanour* denotes non-verbal communication and communicative elements "between the lines", including appearance and behaviour, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, display of emotions, and general composition. It also includes positioning elements *outside* the performance in question, e.g., the editor-in-chief's lifestyle and reputation. Although demeanour may appear superficial, it is a constituent component of positioning because it can influence media visibility and resonance through charismatic (or controversial) appeal (Baert & Morgan, 2018; Weber, 1978).

In sum, analysing these three dimensions—and their interplay—is useful to understand how editors-in-chief position themselves and their surroundings, including their newspaper, often with the effect of constructing cultural authority and credibility in the opinion space.

The Danish opinion space

Several Danish newspapers have over the years produced annual lists of the most influential people in Danish society. Examples include the business newspaper *Børsen* (ranking people from the financial sector), the center-right leaning weekly newspaper *Weekendavisen* (applying a satirical approach) and the center-left, culturally agenda-setting newspaper *Politiken*. Our case selection was informed by the annual ranking of the 50 most influential opinion makers compiled and published from 2010 to 2019 by *Politiken* (Politiken, 2010–2019). These lists, counting 500 names in total, indicated the visibility and perceived influence of certain actors in the Danish public opinion space of the 2010s, i.e., during a decade of significant technological and economic change in the news industry and of intensified competition among diversified public opinion makers. Compared to *Børsen's* and *Weekendavisen's* lists, *Politiken's* is most relevant for the present study due to its non-satirical, societal approach and due to *Politiken's* significant position in the Danish public opinion space, being the most read newspaper.

When duplicate names were removed, *Politiken's* lists included 164 individuals (111 men and 53 women), which we categorised in nine main groups, inspired by Jacobs and Townsley's mapping (2011) of the American opinion space (see Table 1). Politicians and media professionals, including editors-in-chief, were the two most dominant professional opinionator categories. The editors-in-chief featured on the lists were thus per definition active participants in public discourse, which makes them potential cases for closer analysis. Conversely, editors with mainly administrative profiles were likely less active in the opinion space, i.e. less likely to appear on the lists.

Profession	n	%
Academic	9	6
Artist/cultural celebrity	13	8
Businessperson	3	2
Career opinionator	9	5

Civil society representative	10	6
Commentator	7	4
Media professional	35	21
Politician	72	44
Other	6	4
Total	164 (N)	100

Table 1: Actors in the Danish public opinion space 2010-2019 based on *Politiker's* annual lists.

The lists showed that two editors-in-chief were particularly prominent during the 2010s: Rune Lykkeberg from the niche newspaper *Information*, who appeared on the list every year, and Martin Krasnik from *Weekendavisen*, who appeared six times and topped the list in 2014 as “Opinionator of the year”. We perceive the combination of several appearances and high ranking on the lists as a proxy for significant public visibility and resonance. Furthermore, Lykkeberg and Krasnik are strong cases in the sense that they represent both similarities and differences in the role performance of editor-in-chief. Comparing such variations can help to refine the conceptual framework through a special attention to details and nuances (Yin, 2018).

In terms of similarities, both were born in the early 1970s and were not only highly active in the public opinion space of the 2010s but also represent leading newspapers with distinctly intellectual and opinionated profiles, and continue to do so, as both still serve as editors-in-chief of their respective newspapers. Both are engaged in intellectual debates beyond news coverage, such as publishing a range of influential books and hosting podcasts on complex topics, promoting slow-paced journalism. Neither has a strong presence on social media, thus maintaining an old-fashioned approach to public discourse, i.e., predominantly using established channels within an elite space of institutional media. Both are academics, neither is trained in journalism. In that sense, they are not representatives of a traditional, professional journalism ethos or of contemporary

digital media culture. As will become clear, they represent an intellectual-opinionated version of the editor-in-chief, which makes them exemplary cases for illustrating our analytical approach.

The two cases differ in that their respective newspapers are located on opposite sides of the political spectrum; *Information* is usually categorised as leftist/socialist-leaning, while *Weekendavisen* is conservative or right-wing-liberal. This is reflected in the editors' positioning in political debates; Lykkeberg adheres to left-wing values, Krasnik to a liberal-conservative tradition. Although both went to university, they studied different subjects and their professional trajectories in media and journalism differ.

To elaborate the comparison, we conducted comparative close readings (Micu, 2021) of two individual performances of each case in the same public service television talk show, produced by the Danish Broadcasting Company (DR), *Vi ses hos Clement* (*See you at Clement's*) (2016; 2017). Both appearances were occasioned by Lykkeberg's and Krasnik's appointments as editors-in-chief, offering them an opportunity to state their vision and make an "inaugural address". As different communicative contexts produce different positional affordances and dynamics between the actors involved, we aimed to secure the basis of direct comparison by reducing manifest differences of genre, intermediaries, and institutional context. At the same time, individual interviews focusing on the practices of specific editors-in-chief are rare in Danish public discourse and constitute, as an isolated performance, a unique access to the positioning dynamics of their public operations beyond activities on their respective platforms. In that sense, their performances on this particular show at that particular point in their careers are a unique basis for comparison of their positioning strategies as editors-in-chief.

Vi ses hos Clement (2014–2018) was a political talk show on current events, politics, and culture, hosted by Clement Kjersgaard, known for his provocative, eccentric, snappy, and persistent interview technique. Compared to other formats, television tend to afford more personal and confrontational interactions, which – in this context – serves to illustratively cover as many dimensions of the analytical framework as possible. The performances analysed are first and foremost contributions to the opinion space and does not include in-depth discussions of the day-to-day managerial work of editors-in-chief. Consequently, the empirical material is skewed toward a conceptualisation of the editor-in-chief as opinionator. Nevertheless, since the public positioning of editors-in-chief and their different strategies of generating attention around their newspaper is an inherent part of the role, analysing the distinct ways in which

editors perform this role is crucial to better understand the position in contemporary media culture.

The performative dimensions of the editor-in-chief

The analyses consist of two steps. First, we outline the cases' professional trajectories within the Danish public opinion space, based on publicly available information, showcasing how positioning takes shape at institutional level over time and is grounded in a combination of education, expertise and reputation, publications, media institutional couplings, and public interventions. Second, we present close readings of their public performances on *Vi ses hos Clement*, focusing on staging, rhetoric, and demeanour to illustrate the positioning process in practice.

Rune Lykkeberg: The diagnostician

According to Lykkeberg, his professional trajectory and journalistic approach is significantly shaped by his intellectual background and interests (Lykkeberg, 2018). He studied philosophy and literature at the university (without obtaining a degree) and has since the late 1990s been affiliated with prominent Danish newspapers. These include *Politiken*, where he served as culture editor (2013–2016), and *Information*, where he was a journalist, then culture editor (2001–2013), and, since 2016, editor-in-chief, situating him on the political left of the Danish media spectrum. Since the early 2000s, he has been a regular guest in elite, debate radio and television programs and often participates in *Information*-produced podcasts. These media appearances have positioned him within an intellectualised public space of opinion. Importantly, he has published several monographs, presenting sociopolitical and cultural diagnoses (see Hammershøj, 2015). With his first book, *Kampen om Sandhederne (The Battle of the Truths)*, 2008), he entered the Danish public space of opinion as an intellectual voice, evidenced by his appearance every year on *Politiken*'s list of public opinion makers from 2010 to 2019. His second book, *Alle har Ret (Everyone is right)*, 2012), earned him his highest ranking on *Politiken*'s list (number 12 in 2012). His biographical data thus presents him as performing more as an intellectual observer than as a journalist.

Lykkeberg's performance on *Vi ses hos Clement* (DR, 2016) is emblematic of this positioning as an intellectual editor-in-chief, operating in a discursive space beyond current affairs and politics. In his introduction, host Clement Kjersgaard highlights Lykkeberg's breakthrough book as a defining contribution to public discourse, citing a review describing Lykkeberg as a "young, clever, and

possibly leftist writer” (DR, 2016, 00:34:51). This corroborates the centrality of said publication in Lykkeberg’s positioning and illustrates the importance of the rhetorical engagement of intermediaries, such as critics and TV hosts, in the positional consolidation of actors on a political spectrum.

Kjersgaard immediately challenges Lykkeberg, asking what “his main problem is”. Lykkeberg responds:

I believe the world to be progressive and that we must be progressive and observe the world moving forward. Therefore, there are certain things to which I cannot relate [...] Some forms of power, I cannot understand and therefore do not consider.

(DR, 2016, 00:35:49)

Lykkeberg critically positions the concept of power as his central focal point, mirroring the watchdog ideal of journalism and the intellectual tradition of speaking truth to power (Hawkins & Keren, 2015). In turn, the progress prism through which he claims to observe the world forefronts a basic progressive-liberal agenda.

Kjersgaard states, jokingly, that he considers Lykkeberg “too happy to be editor-in-chief at *Information*” and possibly the happiest man on the left (DR, 2016, 00:36:02). Lykkeberg objects to the premise that the left is inherently angry and pessimistic and moves beyond the host’s entertainment-driven focus on personality (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017) by quickly shifting the focus from himself onto a more conceptual understanding of leftism. This logos-driven strategy of addressing the very grounds of the conversation is typical of intellectual rhetoric (Baert and Morgan, 2018). Instead of framing his claims as opinions, Lykkeberg’s discourse appears detached from personal biases.

Discussing *Information*’s dedicated coverage of the existential threat of climate change, Kjersgaard asks if the progressive alarmism of the newspaper has effectively influenced the public. On a defensive note, Lykkeberg states, “You cannot accuse us of lacking seriousness and pathos” (DR, 2016, 00:43:28) when addressing climate change, which illustrates the face of the newspaper in practice: Lykkeberg’s explicit emphasis on the rhetorical strategy of *Information* shows reflexivity in terms of the positioning mechanisms of the opinion space, while the pronoun “us” indicates a perceived identity between himself as an individual and the newspaper as organisation. This identification is not an uncommon rhetorical construct, but in the context of his performance, it illustrates a positioning by which certain values are attributed across different levels of agency with the effect of Lykkeberg ultimately personifying the newspaper.

Lykkeberg directs another logos appeal at the premise of Kjersgaard's question, which he deems to be based on a "logic of dictatorship", the notion that elites ought to dictate the actions of the public (DR, 2016, 00:44:33). He elaborates:

Our task in this world is not to be a schoolmaster and tell people how to live. That was the way of The Frankfurt School, back in the day, who said 'everyone has false consciousness' [...] Our task is to provide people with arguments and practices to solve the problems on their own.

(DR, 2016, 00:46:05)

Lykkeberg positions *Information* as a stronghold of liberal democratic values with ties to the Enlightenment. He positions himself in opposition to the Marxist tradition of leftism by rejecting the Frankfurt School. Such ethos appeal, incorporating Marxist tropes and terminology, establishes credibility based on erudition, confirming Lykkeberg's intellectual rather than journalistic positioning efforts.

Lykkeberg's optimism is reflected in his smiling demeanour and at times humorous tone, which is slightly mischievous towards Kjersgaard's eccentric persona. To counter the lightness of his conversational strategy, Lykkeberg dresses in suit jacket and tie, which is not the standard aesthetic of Danish media personalities beyond news anchors. He conveys a level of seriousness through symbolic props typically associated with traditional authority (Lincoln, 1994). By contrasting the anti-establishment aesthetic of the cultural left, Lykkeberg's formal aesthetic reads as a performative statement, signalling maturity and seriousness to counter claims of the opposite, including stereotypes of *Information* as a newspaper appealing mainly to nonconformist baby boomers. Combined with Lykkeberg's rhetorical recognition of the substantial overlap between his own and typical right-wing criticisms of the welfare state (DR, 2016, 00:52:26), this indicates an anti-tribalist positioning. Lykkeberg distances himself from a stereotypical leftism of the 20th century, ideologically and aesthetically, while simultaneously rising above political tribalism into a realm of ideas and abstract thinking.

Martin Krasnik: The Devotee

Krasnik is trained in political science, studying at top universities including University of Copenhagen, the Hebrew University, and London School of Economics (Weekendavisen, n.d.). He has worked in journalism since 1995 with main affiliations to national elite news media: the main public service broadcasting company, DR, anchoring a daily news program (*Deadline* at DR2), known for its critical and piercing hosts, and *Weekendavisen*, known for its in-depth,

analytical articles, and opinion-borne approach. At *Weekendavisen* Krasnik served as a journalist, correspondent, and foreign news editor, and since 2017 as editor-in-chief. In Danish public debate, he is known for his engagement in discussions about the Middle East (see Krasnik, 2014; 2023). He has published numerous books about socio-political, cultural, and religious topics, often addressing his Jewish background. Landmark interventions, earning him the first place on *Politiken's* opinion makers' ranking in 2014, connect to the intertwinement of his personal background and public profile as a journalist and news host: In summer 2014, he conducted two interviews as the host of *Deadline* related to rising conflicts in Gaza, leading to accusations of pro-Israel bias. The same year he published the autobiographic book *Fucking jøde! (Fucking Jew!)*, addressing some of the heat he took for his journalistic approach, including antisemitic hate speech. Krasnik's biographical track record presents him as dedicated to journalism as a democratic institution and immersed in politicised topics, at times perceived more as an opinionator than a journalist.

In Kjersgaard's introduction of Krasnik on *Vi ses hos Clement* (DR, 2017), several credentials are listed to emphasise his authoritative position in the Danish opinion space. His long affiliation with *Weekendavisen* and former position as anchor of *Deadline* establish a journalistic ethos, while his autobiography situates him as a personally engaged opinionator. Like his interview with Lykkeberg, Kjersgaard begins by focusing on Krasnik's personality, asking him how long he wanted the job as editor-in-chief at *Weekendavisen* before securing it in 2017 (DR, 2017, 00:06:52). Krasnik claims to have had the ambition since the age of 11, effectively positioning himself as highly ambitious and self-determined.

Kjersgaard asks if Krasnik was hired to promote certain opinions (DR, 2017, 00:07:54). Not only is the question directed at the expectations and responsibilities of the editor-in-chief; it also reads as an attempt to expose the link between Krasnik's personal opinions and his style as a professional journalist. Building on the mentioned criticisms of Krasnik's persona and interview style, the question addresses the central tension in journalism between advocacy and critical inquiry. In response, Krasnik first stresses his managerial responsibilities: "No, I am not. I am hired to run a newspaper where a whole lot of other people have opinions [...] and, of course, to present my opinions occasionally. I am hired to be editor-in-chief and *manage Weekendavisen*" (DR, 2017, 00:07:57).

Subsequently, Krasnik states that he is *also* hired to share his opinions in his editorials, effectively positioning his advocacy role as secondary to his managerial role (DR, 2017, 00:08:14). Kjersgaard seemingly perceives this as a concession on Krasnik's behalf,

implying an ambiguous banter between former colleagues, presumably based on a (performed) rivalry. In contrast to Lykkeberg, Krasnik does not evade Kjersgaard's focus on personality, the persistent frame of the interview. In turn, Krasnik's demeanour is more serious as he appears more irritable and prone to provocation as Kjersgaard insistently circles on Krasnik's supposed stubbornness (DR, 2017, 00:22:10). Like Lykkeberg, Krasnik initially smiles at Kjersgaard's confrontational style, but his general demeanour is more serious, although he appears to respectfully enjoy debating. Unlike Lykkeberg, who dresses formally to offset his left-wing optimism, Krasnik subtly signals professionalism; he is business casual with an academic touch, wearing glasses, a navy blazer, light blue shirt, and a pullover. Kjersgaard pinpoints a key tension of Krasnik's position as editor-in-chief:

There are two issues here [...]: The former is to manage the company and provide others with a platform and ensure a sustainable economy so that [Weekendavisen] does not go bankrupt too soon [...]. The latter is to promote opinions. Regarding the latter, how much responsibility is associated with that, how much power is associated with the role of editor-in-chief?

(DR, 2017, 00:09:18)

Krasnik replies that the promotion of opinions must be taken seriously because it impacts society: "We journalists sometimes forget that. It is just another job... and we are in the entertainment business, as well" (DR, 2017, 00:09:51). Bewildered, Kjersgaard asks if forgetting one's responsibility as editor-in-chief is not paradoxically irresponsible, given Krasnik's track record as an influential opinion leader. Clearly frustrated, Krasnik responds:

It is really important to forget [the responsibility] once in a while. Otherwise, you end up taking yourself 100 percent seriously, and that does not hold up. Then you take your own opinions too seriously, you take your job too seriously, and you forget to look up and see the world.

(DR, 2017, 00:11:11)

Repeating Krasnik's long experience in the opinion space, Kjersgaard asks if the power and influence of journalists is in fact greater than that of shifting politicians, who rarely have stable careers as influencers of public opinion like Krasnik. Krasnik disagrees, stating that politicians occasionally make similar disclaimers of responsibility (DR, 2017, 00:12:15).

Thus, Krasnik subscribes to a traditional understanding of power relations in society, invoking the watchdog ideal of journalism: "I

was awarded ‘Opinionator of the Year’, which was ridiculous and absurd, the same year as Inger Støjberg was a minister and carried through several restrictions on immigration” (DR, 2017, 00:13:03).¹ Krasnik conveys a firm belief in the democratic function of journalism, necessitating a lesser focus on the supposed power of journalists and individual opinionators like himself.

In sum, Krasnik positions himself as a passionate editor-in-chief, dedicated to the democratic ideals of journalism. He constructs an image by which he personifies the watchdog epitome and the professional utility of opinion as a journalistic means to influence society. Although initially foregrounding the managerial responsibilities of the editor-in-chief, this narrative is quickly sidelined by the host’s focus on personality, opinion, and power and Krasnik’s evident devotion when discussing democracy and political influence.

Discussion and conclusion

By introducing positioning theory and operationalising it through comparative close readings, we have illustrated how editors-in-chief can be approached as more than newspaper managers. The performance of the editor-in-chief in the Danish opinion space is, as shown by our analyses, characterised by different, personalised approaches to balancing the individual and institutional dimensions of the position. While the close readings do not allow us to make generalisable claims about editors-in-chief across contexts, they do illustrate the usefulness of positioning theory in explaining how editors-in-chief navigate the opinion space – in this case – at the intersection of journalism and public intellectualism. We have conceptualised the editor-in-chief as someone operating simultaneously as individual opinion-maker and representative of their news organisation. In this fused positioning practice, they contribute with personal passions, convictions, and analyses to position their newspaper in public discourse, while also leveraging their institutional affiliation to position themselves. In conclusion, our contribution to journalism studies and public opinion research may be summarised in four main points.

First, by (re)conceptualising the editor-in-chief as a key journalistic actor, embedded in the space of opinion, we have shifted the focus from day-to-day managerial work to a more performative domain of public opinion making. This acknowledges the editor-in-chief, especially in a Nordic context, as the face of the newspaper to a broader public.

Second, to theoretically accommodate this shift, we propose positioning theory and a new analytical framework by which

journalism studies can approach the opinion space. The positioning framework adds new knowledge about the editor-in-chief as a key actor category in public opinion formation. In times when the opinion space is increasingly persona-driven (Rønlev & Bengtsson, 2022) and populated by media personalities engaging audiences and generating attention across media (Kristensen & From, 2015) in ways that the collective voice of a newspaper cannot, legacy news media and journalism face new demands of maintaining their cultural position and institutional authority (Reese, 2022). As exemplified by two Danish cases who performatively *personify* their organisation, editors-in-chief may function as vehicles for bringing news organisations into a domain of individualised opinion, governed by a distinct focus on personality. Conversely, by the performative *positioning* of editors-in-chief, the agency of their organisation is transferred to the individual editors, who, in turn, utilise their personal sensibilities and qualifications to construct authority and maintain the necessary relevance of their organisation in a democratic society.

Third, the comparative positioning analyses of two prominent editors-in-chief in the Danish opinion space of the 2010s, who continue to incarnate their newspapers well into the 2020s, exemplify the applicability of the positioning framework and show how the position as face of the newspaper may be performed in different ways to personify distinct publicist profiles. *The diagnostician* (Rune Lykkeberg) positions himself as an intellectual editor-in-chief through rhetorical references to The Frankfurt School, emotional restraint, and a distinct detachment from personal opinions. *The devotee* (Martin Krasnik) positions himself as a passionate editor-in-chief, using personal conviction to serve the professional, democratic ideals of journalism. The two cases mix public intellectual authority and journalistic authority (Johansen, 2021), illustrating Jacobs and Townsley's point (2011, p. 80) that different actors, even within the category of editor-in-chief, "introduce alternative definitions of truth, competing claims of authority, different topics of discussion, and different rhetorical styles of argument" into the space of opinion. This may be explained by the cases' different personalities, but it is also cultivated by their different professional trajectories and the news organisations that have shaped their careers and which they represent as editors-in-chief (see Drezner, 2017). Both cases are affiliated with niche newspapers of sorts with different political leanings. Contrary to the wider appeal of mainstream broadsheets, niche newspapers depend on the distinctiveness of their position in the opinion space and, relatedly, their brand. Charismatic and highly visible editors-in-chief help to construct, consolidate, and personify such distinctiveness.

Fourth, the Nordic opinion space is still strongly associated with newspapers, public service media, and a strong deliberative space of opinion, prioritising publicist values over commercial interests. Contrary to, e.g., the US context where legacy news institutions are losing ground to alternative media and platforms, Nordic editors-in-chief are not only newspaper managers overseeing staff and running daily business; they are also the face of the newspaper, performing their distinct position across media by rhetorical strategies and performative actions. Analytically explicating this dimension of the editor-in-chief beyond the Nordic context may guide future studies to advance the scholarly understanding of the complex interplay between actors and institutions in a dynamic and competitive news and information landscape.

Future research can possibly develop the positioning framework further to better understand the dynamic relationship between news organisations and media personalities in a public opinion space that is constantly diversifying and intensifying. To substantiate the study of how editors-in-chief distinguish themselves through performative, interventionist practices, future studies may integrate quantitative mappings of the cross-mediated presence of editors-in-chief with genre analyses and qualitative close readings of performative constructions of distinctiveness.

NOTES

¹ From 2015 to 2019, Inger Støjberg was the Danish Minister for Immigration and Integration, generating much controversy by introducing an illegal decree to separate asylum couples at refugee centers, leading to her impeachment and conviction in court in 2021.

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