

People and networks in the history of Nordic journalism

Introduction to special issue

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Traditional press historians have concentrated primarily on the structure of the institution and its major forces as well as on the importance of protecting content, instead of addressing the issue of production in terms of labor and newswriters. They have done so under ideological conditions that have generated a top-down history of the press that privileged property and ownership at the expense of an understanding of newswriting.

With these words, Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennen (1995, p. ix) defined the US field of media history in the introduction to the edited volume *Newswriters: Toward a history of the rank and file*. The editors called for a critical media history in which newswriters and their daily labour were placed at the centre. The book can be viewed as the main contribution of the 1990s labour-centred approach to journalism history (Hardt, 1990; Im, 1997, Brennen, 2001). Yet, it did not have much impact in the Nordic region. Even if the 1990s witnessed a more analytical approach to past media sources and media history as a particular research field emerged, research on Nordic journalism history focused more on institutional perspectives and was stuck within national borders (Bruhn Jensen, 1996–2016; Bastiansen & Dahl, 2003, Gustafsson, Rydén, 2000).

This does not mean that newswriters were totally forgotten. For example, Martin Eide (2000) published an extensive volume on the development of the role of an editor in Norwegian press history. Around the same time, the Swedish scholarship on women journalists flourished, producing several PhD dissertations and compilation books on women journalists and their work (e.g. Ney, 1999; Lundgren, 2002; Lönnroth, 2008). This scholarship was mostly done by media scholars and previous journalists, whereas in historical

scholarship the work of journalists and the result of this work – meaning media texts – have rarely been addressed simultaneously.

Digitisation of newspapers and magazines has multiplied historical scholarship that uses print media sources during the 2000s even if many of the scholars applying digital archives may not define their work as media or journalism history (Kurvinen, 2018; Kurvinen, 2024). Simultaneously, new historiographical, methodological and theoretical trends and perspectives have come to the fore in the scholarly field of media history. These include but are not limited to scholarship on transnational, intermedial and cultural historical perspectives (e.g., Cronqvist, Jarlbrink & Lundell, 2014, pp. 5–7; Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017; Pedersen, Cronqvist & Holgersson, 2023, pp. 10–11), digital methods regarding the exploration of journalism history (Bunout, Ehrmann & Clavert, 2022; Lundell et al., 2023), and an increased emphasis on knowledge transfer between professional spheres (Ziemer, 2023). The focus on entangled media histories has been particularly prominent, bringing forth not only transnational but transmedial aspects of media history in the Nordic region and beyond (Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017).

Recently, a new emphasis on the significance of newswriters, i.e. journalists and other newsroom personnel, has also emerged in Nordic region, as has criticism of “media-centrism” (Lundell, 2008; Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017, p. 132; Kurvinen, 2018). This special issue stems from this scholarship and starts from the premise that media history in general and journalism history in particular may thrive from an approach that cuts across traditional dividing lines, such as media genres, national borders and professional organisations. By employing open-ended and innovative approaches to historical research on journalism, a deeper understanding of the actors behind journalism (journalists, editors and other newswriters), their networks, formal and informal practices, their legitimisation efforts and their products will inevitably follow. It will also allow us to explore how these may be understood as part of broader societal processes. As Marie Cronqvist and Christopher Hilgert (2017, p. 136) have argued, “studying media and communication is essential to understanding history”.

In the following introduction, we first discuss our understanding of the fields of Journalism Studies and History and their current approaches to journalistic agency. Second, we discuss some of the methodological challenges that researchers of individuals and their networks in journalism history may face. In the third and final section, we introduce the special issue and the ways in which the contributions have tackled these issues.

The question of agency in Journalism Studies and in History

Both Journalism Studies and History are traditionally considered fields in which the use of theory is subjugated to empirically-steered research questions. Within Journalism Studies, this has often materialised as a pragmatist-participatory approach towards theory whereas historians have traditionally adhered to a devout empiricism in defining their relationship with theory (Ahva & Steensen, 2019; Pedersen, Cronqvist & Holgersson, 2023, pp. 13–14).

These relationships are in reality more complex than this simplification, but they partly explain the different approaches to media history applied in these two fields: whereas journalism scholars often draw on first-hand knowledge of professional journalism and its craft practices, historians are left to make their interpretations based on media texts possibly enriched with archival material. Resulting from this, the fact of journalistic agency is often a self-given approach in Journalism Studies (almost being the *raison d'être* of the field) in which ethnographic data collection and interviews are commonly used methods, and social relations between editors, journalists and their sources take centre stage in interpretations. On the contrary, historians discussing media sources have been more inclined to focusing on media content without reflecting on the agency of newsmen. Often, this happens as part of the process of pursuing research which was not genuine media history in the first instance, because it studied primarily a non-media problem, using media sources.

In media-historical scholarship institutional histories and biographical approaches to media personalities, such as star reporters or influential editor-in-chiefs, have often played leading roles (Kurvinen, 2018, p. 317, 322, Batikha, Munk, Seidenfaden, 2023). Rank-and-file journalists have received more attention in feminist scholarship that has identified women's role in journalism history in general, even if this scholarship too has tended to identify the prominent personalities in media, the so-called "first women" (Kurvinen, 2020). On the contrary, male journalists who have not possessed any 'star quality' have often been left as anonymised members of the critical mass or they have represented the unquestionable norm of a (male) journalist (Kurvinen, 2018, p. 317; on the female bias in gender analysis of journalism in general, see Jain, 2022, p. 69).

That said, there have been some calls for more agency-oriented approaches in journalism history. An illustrative example is an article published by the Finnish historian and former culture journalist Patrick Bruun in 1983 (pp. 50–51). He called for press historians to consider editorial work and craft practices when interpreting

journalism content and pointed out that a knowledge of individual journalists and editorial networks would inevitably deepen analysis of journalism content. Likewise, Eide (2000, pp. 13–14) emphasised the importance of the editor's role in understanding the role of the media in fostering freedom of speech and democracy. One of us editors, Heidi Kurvinen (2018, p. 312), has argued that the history of the media does not exist without the people who produced the content and made it consumable to the newspaper and magazine readers as well as television watchers and radio listeners. This means that newsrooms and wider media companies as institutions and the meanings they produce require actors who, on the one hand, keep the institutions functioning and, on the other hand, produce content. Media scholars Maija Töyry, Laura Saarenmaa and Nanna Särkkä (2011, p. 34) have similarly pointed out that media texts “are not neutral material resources, but always from some perspective, produced by some principles – and produced by someone”.

Newsworkers do not only adjust to prevailing working conditions and craft practices, but they can use their agency to change them. (Hardt & Brennen, 1995, p. 10; Kurvinen, 2018, p. 320.) A prominent example of this is the trade union work that aimed to improve gender equality within the profession in Western newsrooms from the 1960s onwards. While the status of women in newsrooms has improved, prevailing notions of news values have occasionally been challenged. This happened when *Aftonbladet's* women journalists produced and delivered an internal document to their co-workers problematising the male-dominated newsroom culture in 1978. The document – later published in book-form as *Dokumentet – och vad hände sen?* (1979) – presented Swedish women's experiences of working in a male dominated newsroom, but it also promoted women's perspective in journalism (Kurvinen, 2018, p. 320; Kurvinen, 2019, p. 1123, 1127). The example clearly shows the importance of what we may call agentic acts in the development of journalism as a profession and as a product.

Pauliina Penttilä's (2021; see also Kurvinen, 2022, p. 134) model of the performative nature of professional journalism offers one way to further develop the empirical observation. According to Penttilä, journalists may choose between sufficient, ideal and dynamic repetition of the prevailing understandings of what consist of good journalism in a particular newsroom. While sufficient and ideal repetition maintain and support professional norms, dynamic repetition destabilises craft practices and ideas of good journalism.

Penttilä's model indicate that journalists possess or adopt different levels of agency while working in newsrooms. Hence, journalism can be viewed as a social structure that influences the daily work of

journalists but is simultaneously inherently dependent on their agency (e.g. Ryfe, 2009, p. 673).

However, previous scholarship points to the ambiguousness of individual agency. For example, Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, Kaisa Ketokivi and Anna Leppo (2014, p. 366) emphasise that agency in people's lived experiences is always defined by the situation in which the agentic act is being performed. Scholars have become increasingly interested in "relational agency", which points to the interpersonal relations between people that influence the agency of each of the parties (Maares, Banjac & Nölleke, 2023, pp. 1614–1616). Newswork in general can be viewed as inherently defined by interpersonal relations, not only within newsrooms but also when it comes to the subjects of the news – interviewees and reported entities – and the audience of the product and their valuations. It is also worth remembering that journalists are not the only ones whose work count in journalism. News work may also be approached from the operational perspective as Allie Kosterich and Paul Ziek (2020, pp. 318–321) have suggested. By considering the agency of technologists, marketing, and printers, we may gain a more complete journalism history.

The discussions on agency overlap in many ways with theoretisations of journalists' *autonomy*. Journalists may practice autonomy on an individual level, in their daily work. However, their autonomy is restricted by the institutional setting, which consists of the newsroom culture and craft practices. In daily practice, high levels of autonomy corresponds, for example, with journalists' opportunity to decide the framing of their news story and the sources used. Hence, the autonomy of journalists is an essential part of press freedom and gives credibility for journalists' work as professionals (e.g., Sjøvaag, 2013; Gajardo & Mellado, 2025).

This human-centered approach to journalism has recently been complicated by the material turn, which has encouraged scholars to discuss the role of technology in journalism. Also, new ways of doing journalism, such as using AI, have challenged individual agency of journalists. While the agency of journalists has been complemented with the agency of non-human actors, the question of agency has, nevertheless, remained as central (Domingo, 2015; Primo & Zago, 2015; Sánchez & Pan, 2025, p. 171; Thäsler-Kordonouri & Koliska, 2025).

Where and how to find agency in the history of journalism?

Despite the evidence of the role played by individual agency, the role of editors and journalists has often been neglected in journalism history. Partly, this can be explained by the source material

available: often, the only historical documents left in newsrooms are the final products, i.e. the paper issues or the programs – and sometimes even those are not preserved. This means that scholars need to be creative when searching for traces of journalists' agency. As an example, media scholar Sharon Maxwell Magnus (2025) used oral history interviews with previous women's magazine editors to reveal new insights into women's magazines as arenas for discussion of feminism. She also applied her own experience as a former women's magazine editor when analysing the sources as part of the institutional frame of three women's magazines in the UK.

As exemplified by Maxwell Magnus, one way of gaining a sharper understanding of which sources may be relevant is to reflect on who to consider one's key agents. This can be done, for example, by reflecting on the three overlapping and mutually constitutive "research paths" recently proposed by Josef Batikha, Hannibal Munk and Emil Eyby Seidenfaden (2023). These are the *conditions*, the *narratives* and the *products* of news media in media history. By conditions is meant the norms, institutions and infrastructure that underpin a given news media landscape, such as censorship or public service laws, media businesses, trade unions organisations or "publicist clubs". These conditions are defined and built by the surrounding society in collaboration with media actors themselves. The sources can be accessed publicly (laws, regulations), in the archives of semi-official institutions such as Press Courts or in the archives of trade unions and their magazines. By *narratives* is meant the stories, mythologies and legitimacies that journalists, editors and publicists have produced to justify and consolidate themselves. The sources here are memoirs, "manifestoes" for new outlets, nomination texts for awards, monuments, exhibitions and the like, in line with what Patrik Lundell has examined in his appropriation of the phrase "the medium is the message" (Lundell, 2008) and what Ida Willig's research has demonstrated with regards to the nomination texts for the Danish Cavling Award (Willig, 2020). Finally, *products* refers to a classic source base, namely the outlets and issues themselves as they have been published and – recently – digitised for the benefit and enjoyment of media scholars and historians alike.

The three paths overlap in most research. For example, national journalist-unions have in some countries sponsored their own history projects during which oral histories have been gathered from trade union activists. Furthermore, the products of news work do not only reveal what was "in the air" in the societal discussion of its time but also include traces of journalists' agency (Kurvinen, 2024). Even if the manner of publishing by one's own name is a relatively new practice in all Nordic countries, the personal portraits of journalists and columnists have appeared in newspapers and magazines

at least from the mid-20th century onwards. These texts often focus on prominent journalists who have had a star quality in their own time, but often they reveal details of the everyday work at newsrooms as well as hierarchies between different news topics. Likewise, journalism textbooks and contemporary registers of journalists alongside journalists' memoirs offer valuable information on the craft practices, allowing the scholar to contextualise the journalistic agency that can be identified in other sources. (Kurvinen 2018, pp. 317–318.)

The point here is that this triangle of research paths can be used to investigate the role of individuals and their networks in journalism-history across media conditions, narratives and products. Indeed, all three paths are represented in this special issue. While some of our authors have dug into memoirs released by reporters and writers, others have accessed the outlets themselves to map the development of a specific genre of news content.

The use of newspaper sources has become particularly convenient after the digital turn, but the extent of digitised press material differs between Nordic countries, as does the availability of their usage. This is a result of the varied digitisation policies of national libraries. Whereas in Finland, the digitisation of media material proceeds systematically from the oldest volumes to the newer ones, including both minor publications and major news outlets (Kurvinen, 2023), in Denmark and Sweden the selection is skewed towards certain newspapers that have been selected to digitisation based on different criteria¹. Hence, certain newspapers are available in digital form in their entirety, while others are still waiting to be digitised. So far, the digital media collections are most widespread in Norway as well as in the joint digital media archive of Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands (Bastiansen, 2023).

Although digitisation has opened opportunities for new kinds of research questions and methods, it has paradoxically limited some aspects of research. This is because copyrights limit access to digital material. Even if researchers may gain wider access to copyright secured parts of the digitised collections at least in Finland and Norway, the access is granted only for research institutions of one's own country. This has fostered nation-based research and made transnational approaches difficult despite the widely shared critique of methodological nationalism. The copyright-free press material has already initiated innovative ways of tracing the 19th century text reuse across national borders in the Nordic region and beyond (e.g., Paju, Rantala & Salmi, 2023; Lundell et al., 2023), but data collection of the newspaper and magazine texts published in the 20th century most of the time requires a research visit to the premises of different national libraries in Nordic countries. Likewise, the interest in

distant reading of the material has dispelled the agency of news-workers. Thus, we are particularly delighted that many of the articles in this special issue show that the individual-agency perspective and digital methods are not mutually exclusive.

The special issue: People and networks in the history of Nordic journalism

The idea for this special issue emerged in the aftermath of the symposium titled “Actor-driven approaches to the history of journalism”, organized by Dr. Emil Eiby Seidenfaden and Dr. Emil Stjernholm at the University of Copenhagen in April 2024. The symposium derived from the realisation that Nordic journalism history did not include much discussion of individual agency, even though individuals and their networks undoubtedly shape media history in multiple ways. To foster a broad selection of participants and scholarly creativity, the definition of agency was left open as is also the case in this special issue. As a result, the contributions do not share a singular idea of what agency is nor do they problematise the concept explicitly.

Nevertheless, all the contributions enrich the discussion of agency and an actor-driven approach in journalism history. What connects all the articles is that the agency of individuals is viewed as relational. **Satu Sorvali** and **Reetta Hänninen** apply an intersectional approach to show how the viability of two early women’s periodicals in Finland was a result of various factors that shaped the lives of their creators, Aurora Olin and Saima Grönstrand. **Jimmy Engren** and **Johan Jarlbrink** combine micro and macro perspectives in journalism history showing how a biographical approach may deepen the analysis made by distant reading of media material. The authors convincingly point out how one editor, Isidor Kjellberg, and his paper functioned as a node in a transatlantic network connecting Swedish emigrants in the new world in America to Swedish readers in the old country.

The interplay between craft practices, ideals of journalism and the agency of individual journalists takes centre stage in the articles by **Aaron Ackerley**, **Eva Åsén Ekstrand** and **Cecilia Aare**. While Ackerley sketches a theoretical framework for approaching journalists’ autonomy in newsrooms, Ekstrand and Aare focus on output and later memoir-like material to analyse journalists as part of wider societies and the ideational currencies of their times. The interplay between media systems, craft practices and the agency of individual journalists runs as an undercurrent in all these articles.

Sometimes, individuals – and their agency – are hiding in journalism content. The article by **Hanne Jørndrup**, **Ida Willig**, **Mark Blach-Ørsten** and **Mette Bengtsson** is an excellent reminder of this.

The authors reveal how a changing media landscape has influenced the manner in which biographical announcements and obituaries have been published in Danish newspapers during the past 100 years. They ask what the gender composition of these non-news items in the newspapers has been across a century and show that the longer the texts have become the more gender has affected their content. More specifically, women are portrayed as mothers, spouses and children of their fathers more often in modern journalism than was the case previously when the non-news material took up less space.

Media historical research has traditionally been done in two fields and the contributors to this special issue, as well, are both historians and media scholars. Even if a close dialogue between all contributions is not always visible in a special issue format, we hope that the result will foster future collaboration between contributors as well as, in a wider sense, a shared interest between media scholars and historians. As guest editors we are grateful that *Journalistica* agreed to our proposal.

Finally, in a time when scholars more often feel pressured enough to decline requests to peer review, we want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the peer-reviewers whose valuable comments helped the authors to polish their arguments and scholarly foundations. Academic publishing is dependent on this behind-the-scenes work, which challenges the authors to improve their work even more.

We wish you a pleasant reading.

NOTES

¹ About the digitisation policies in Denmark and Sweden, see Digitalisering af aviserne. Det Kgl. Bibliotek, <https://www.kb.dk/find-materiale/samlinger/avissamlingen/digitalisering-af-aviserne>; Svenska tidningar – frågor och svar: Genomförda digitiseringsprojekt. Kungliga Biblioteket, <https://feedback.blogg.kb.se/forums/topic/genomforda-digitaliseringsprojekt/>; About the database in Sweden: <https://feedback.blogg.kb.se/forums/topic/about-the-database/>.

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