Chapter 19

Conclusion

Nordic political communication between change and continuity

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Abstract

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from the contributions in this anthology is that it is hardly relevant to talk about a clear-cut Nordic model of political communication that highly contrasts other democratic states and their political communication systems. Global trends such as digitalisation and commercialisation of media systems and blurring lines between national and global political issues influence political communication. Still, there are many observations that confirm the existence of prevailing Nordic system peculiarities, such as comparably higher levels of voter turnout and political trust and relatively strong private and public news media. While these merging characteristics exist, it is relevant to look more carefully upon factors in the Nordic countries that seem to contribute to continuity and stability in political communication systems. In our view, it is particularly interesting to pay attention to relevant factors in the Nordic countries that may contribute to resilience in these societies. So far, the Nordic countries have shown considerable ability to embrace international political communication trends without jeopardising essential nation-specific distinctive features. Whether this resilience will prevail in the future remains an open question.

Keywords: power, political communication, change, continuity, resilience, Nordic countries

Introduction

The intention of this anthology on political communication in the Nordic countries has been to go beyond the usual existing generalisations and perceptions about this region in order to be able to paint more nuanced and insightful pictures of what is actually happening from political communication perspectives today. Does the Nordic model still stand out from the rest of the mature democracies in the world? Do political systems and media systems deviate so much from international trends that it is reasonable to continue talking about

a Nordic political communication model? And if so, what is it and how does it impact on the development and resilience of the Nordic countries?

There is of course not a single simple answer to such broad questions, but this anthology has intended to focus on current important developments by bringing together leading media and communication scholars and political scientists from the Nordic countries to offer valuable insights from both country-based and comparative perspectives. The main objective has been to supplement established images of societal conditions in the Nordic countries with theoretically driven assumptions and empirically based conclusions about political communication realities in these countries today.

In the following sections of this chapter, we address political, media, and voter perspectives, as well as possible shifting power relations between political communication actors in the Nordic countries. The final section focuses on the relevance of a Nordic model of political communication and the dynamic interplay between change and continuity in the process of political communication developments.

A new political landscape

Politically, the once very stable Nordic countries have experienced considerable transformations of their formerly rather enduring party systems. The single most radical change is the successes of rightwing populist parties in national elections and the significant impact they have had on politics in the four biggest Nordic countries, as discussed in the chapters on media and politics in the five Nordic countries (chapters 2–6) and in Herkman and Jungar's contribution. The Danish Peoples' Party, the Finns Party, the (Norwegian) Progress Party, and the Sweden Democrats have all become well-established political actors in the national parliaments, and, with their presence and increased importance in the national assemblies, changed basic conditions for coalition-building and government formation. Populist parties have been part of governments in Finland (2015–2017) and Norway (2013–2020) and have been politically influential in Denmark. The Sweden Democrats have so far been more isolated in the parliament, even if collaborations with other parties to the right have started to grow recently.

The most obvious effect of the rise of populist parties in the Nordic countries is probably the declined importance of long withstanding ideological left-right conflicts in politics, even if they still exist to some extent. Besides this traditional economy-based conflict dimension, a rising disagreement is now very apparent between supporters of global, urban, and liberal values, and people more loyal to national, traditional, and authoritarian principles (the so-called GAL-TAN dimension). The new conflict dimension could also be described as a conflict be-

tween post-industrial, ecological perspectives and industrial, materialistic values. The change is not only evident with regard to political ideologies, but can also be noted by changing political agendas, where economic and welfare issues are now challenged by immigration, law and order, and cultural issues. International unexpected events can be added to the picture. The migration waves from the Middle East and Africa that affected Europe, especially in the autumn of 2015, have also contributed to the transformation of political agendas and political party policy positions in all Nordic countries, even if not in exactly the same way. Additionally, the global coronavirus crisis in 2020 and its deep consequences for economy and welfare will influence Nordic societies for many years, even if it is too early to pinpoint what the long-term political consequences will be.

Modern democracies are associated with an increasing role for professional pressure groups and lobbyists. This is also true for the Nordic countries, but the role of public relations professionals seems to be a bit overestimated in the Nordic political communication context, at least compared to the communicative resources of big organisations (Ihlen et al., Chapter 15). At the same time, the phenomenon of so-called revolving doors, where politicians now move more frequently between the political arena and the public relations industry, calls for more studies of how lobbying develops within this context.

The transformations of Nordic party systems and the increased strength of right-wing populist parties are similar to political trends observed worldwide, and particularly in Europe. However, these changes are taking place within political structures that can still be described as more consensus-oriented and corporatist than in most other countries.

The hybrid media ecosystem

Parallel to the political systems in the Nordic countries, media systems have undergone considerable transformations. During recent years, the financing model for public service media has changed in the four biggest Nordic countries from a traditional licence fee model to a new tax-based system. Even if the main reason is digital media development, fear has been expressed by some political and media actors that this change challenges the established "arms length principle" and will make public service media more vulnerable for political pressure. This discussion has initially been most intense in Denmark, where substantial budget cuts in public service media have also been decided (Kristensen & Blach-Ørsten, Chapter 2). However, the intensified and polarised debate on public service media impartiality indicates that similar debates – as well as political actions – may follow everywhere (Allern et al., Chapter 7).

Despite political controversies, public service media have remained strong in Nordic media markets. Public service radio channels have the biggest audi-

ence market share everywhere, and public service channels also maintain their positions in the much more competitive television market. Furthermore, public service media in the Nordic countries have been successful in developing new services on digital platforms.

The digitalisation of Nordic media markets is an overall trend with significant influences on both public and commercial media performances. Many chapters (see Chapters 2–8) in this anthology refer to the emergence of so-called hybrid media ecosystems, where traditional news media logics and social media logics are blended and where media users develop more individual usage patterns based on their own interest and taste preferences. Overall, media use is more fragmented than ever, on national, regional, and local levels. Online and mobile communications have turned out to be the main channels for news consumption (Newman et al., 2019). Older generations are still relatively high consumers of printed papers and broadcast news, while younger generations to a large extent rely on digital and social media platforms. At the same time, new media formats like hyperlocals, freesheets, and alternative media add to the already complex media landscape in the Nordic countries (Lindén et al., Chapter 8; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, Chapter 13).

The hybrid media system certainly puts traditional news media in a less favourable position than previously but does not necessarily mean the end of news media as overall political communication expands and becomes more inclusive (Chadwick, 2013). Legacy media still play a fairly important role for many people, but more citizens tend to spend their limited time for media consumption on other media outlets in the expanding digital ecosystem. To put it simply, the hybrid media system offers previously unseen opportunities for individual choices, but at the same time, the high-choice media environment distorts conditions for well-functioning public spheres based on equal access and equal information capacities, and polarises public opinion (Prior, 2007). Even if more outlets mean greater media pluralism, the weakening of legacy news media and the increasing reliance on algorithm-driven digital media platforms seem to facilitate fragmentation and polarisation of the public in most European countries today (Davis, 2019). Thus, the connections between citizens, media, and political institutions have been described as increasingly "disrupted" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

The Nordic countries do still have comparably strong national media companies. Newspapers face increasing economic problems, but their reach is comparably high, and public service media continue to be central in people's media diets, particularly so in crisis situations. Local and regional media are relatively strong but operate in increasingly fragmented media landscapes (Lindén et al., Chapter 8). Media use is increasingly based on individual and socioeconomic predicators such as age, gender, class, ethnicity, and cultural values (Harrie, 2018). The continuous fragmentation is often perceived as a

problem, but previous research on media effects in the Nordic countries indicates that social media may have potential to increase political mobilisation in parts of the electorate, especially among people normally less interested in politics (Beyer et al., Chapter 17).

The volatile electorate

To a large extent, Nordic citizens vote. Election data show that voter turnout in the Nordic countries is high in an international comparison (Hopmann & Karlsen, Chapter 11). In some cases, the trend also indicates increasing figures. National elections attract more voters than do local or European Parliament elections, even though voter turnout in European Parliament elections increased in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden in 2019. Local elections in Sweden have significantly higher levels of voter participation than in neighbouring countries due to the electoral system where elections on different political levels take place on the same day (Nord & Grusell, Chapter 6). It is also important to note that voting turnout figures differ in various parts of each country in the Nordic region.

Despite the fact that voter turnout seems to be relatively stable over time, voters tend to be more volatile. The general trend of declining party identification continues, and voters make their decisions late during the campaigns. On average, about half of the electorate in the Nordic countries report that they make their voting decisions during the campaign (Hopmann & Karlsen, Chapter 11). The relatively huge number of swing voters and uncertain voters make election campaigning more intense and the election outcome less easy to predict. Additionally, issue voting has become more important when examining reasons for voters' preferences during election campaigns. Even if most Nordic voters can still refer to their position on a left-right–wing political scale, single issues like immigration, environment, education, or healthcare are becoming more decisive for the final selection of political party or candidate.

However, voter turnout is not the only indicator of a healthy democracy. Political trust is a cornerstone in contemporary sustainable and transparent societies. At the same time, a significant consequence of current media transformations in these societies is increasing problems of locating trust and reliable information in the complex communication environment. The Nordic countries are all faced with these challenges, and political trust has gradually become more polarised in Nordic societies, but trust in political institutions and political actors as well as trust in the media remain comparably high in relation to other mature democracies in the world. A comparison of trust in news media in the Nordic countries in 2019 showed that the highest figure is in Finland (59%) and the lowest in Sweden (39%) (Newman et al., 2019). Sweden also stands out as the country where trust in public service media is most polarised, and

the place where concern about the diffusion and effects of fake news are most articulated (Kalsnes et al., Chapter 14).

On the supply side, election campaign communications are becoming more diverse than ever, with parties using a wide range of channels to maximise public attention and electoral support. Political parties are able to use new digital tools, and voters can reach tailored political messages on many more platforms than before. News media, social media, and direct communication are more equally and innovatively used in order to target different parts of the electorate with individually based messages (Allern et al., Chapter 7; Bolin & Falasca, 2019; Magin et al., 2017). However, the degree of professionalisation of party election campaigning in the Nordic region seems to reflect differences between parties rather than differences between countries. Innovations and new campaign tools are also, to a large extent, influenced by practices and experiences from countries outside Northern Europe.

Nordic electorates are becoming more volatile, and party identification is going down, as in many other Western democracies. Election campaigns are increasingly influenced by external trends. At the same time, elections are taking place in a continued Nordic context of comparably high voter turnout and public trust in political institutions and news media.

To conclude, the last decades have seen both remarkable changes in the relations between political communication actors in the Nordic countries and strong signs of continuity with regard to basic political communication structures. In the next section of this chapter, we discuss the importance of change and continuity of political communication systems in the Nordic region. To what extent are power relations in society affected, and to what extent is it still relevant to talk about a Nordic model of political communication?

Power shifts and "outside-election" contexts

Political communication studies are not simply a static overview of the existing relations between politics, media, and citizens. Political communication is basically a study of power dynamics within society with a specific interest in which actors dominate in the public sphere and influence political agendas, the framing of political issues, and peoples' perceptions of reality. Political communication is, to a large extent, a matter of power struggles, not only between groups with different political ideas and policies, but also between political parties and other institutions with considerable opinion-formation capacities, such as legacy news media, social media, alternative media, pressure groups and lobbyists, non-governmental organisations, and grassroot movements. Power is gained and power is lost in the continuous development of political communication relations.

When analysing political communication power relations in the Nordic countries today, it is obvious that existing political and media conditions are under pressure. Leading political parties – both to the left and to the right – face increasing problems with maintaining dominance in national parliaments. The former big parties are not that big anymore (even though social democracy is still stronger than in the rest of Europe). National party systems have generally seen a more even distribution of voter support in recent elections, and government formation processes have become more complex. In the spring of 2020, both Denmark and Sweden were ruled by minority social democratic–led governments, while both Finland and Norway had newly reshuffled governments after internal government crises.

A similar pattern can be observed in Nordic media systems. Main actors such as daily newspapers and public service broadcasters are still important and reach relatively large audiences in the Nordic countries (as seen in the country-specific chapters 2–6 of this anthology). But their historically dominating role in agenda-setting, priming, and framing processes is not that evident in the evolving digital media landscape that characterises the Nordic countries today. As the time most people in the North spend with media consumption every day is more or less the same as before, competition for public attention has increased dramatically and generated more complex, fragmented, and individual media-use diets. Generally speaking, online and mobile media and social media have become more relevant for people in the Nordic countries, while national, regional, and local newspapers, as well as public service radio and television stations, are facing difficulties with decreased commercial revenues and weakening audience market shares, respectively.

However, the picture is not completely black and white. Some specific news organisations (such as Amedia, DR, and Schibsted) have been remarkably successful on digital media platforms. But in an overall perspective, media power in the Nordic countries has definitely become more difficult to define as the expanding media system also makes every single media outlet less powerful.

Power relations in political communication studies have traditionally often been examined within an election-campaign context strictly focusing on the three key actors of political parties, news media, and voters. For several reasons, it seems relevant to widen this perspective and also reflect upon power structures outside the limited campaign timeframe, as well as to include perspectives outside the usual suspects in the political communication ménage à trois.

Political communication activities are not isolated to the final four weeks before election day. On the contrary, political positions and declarations need to be officially articulated and motivated at any occasion. Communications must continuously be coordinated and effectively managed in this permanent campaign context. Political parties in governing positions must communicate in a way that maximises their possibilities of remaining in power after the next

election, and opposition parties need to do their best to communicate and lay ground for an alternative electoral outcome. Generally, political communication between elections is well suited for the sitting governments, as they often have the upper hand when communication resources and skills are compared (Sanders & Canel, 2013).

But there are definitely political "between-election" situations where power plays out differently. This is particularly true during societal crises and political scandals. In such dramatic situations, the political communication playground is less specifically defined and the evolving processes less easy to predict. If less cleverly managed by governments, these situations can shift the initiatives and framing of the story from the government to the political opposition and the media.

The global outbreak of the coronavirus in the spring of 2020 had the potential to be a political communication game changer in the Nordic countries, as well as everywhere else. In this unexpected and extreme situation, national governments imposed heavy restrictions and regulations of almost wartime character in order to decrease death tolls and improve health care capacity to handle the Covid-19 disease. The extraordinary situation changed the political agenda completely, and usual day-to-day political conflicts almost disappeared. As is normally the case in stressful situations, the initial stages of this crisis also resulted in increased support for political parties in the government and especially for prime ministers in the Nordic countries. In the long run, opposition parties, media, and public perceptions of capability and accountability may play out differently, but in initial times of crisis, ruling parties generally strengthen their position.

The possible effects of political scandals are also difficult to predict. Comparative studies of political scandals in the Nordic countries confirm that their number has increased in all countries (Allern & Pollack, 2012). This kind of dramatic and disruptive events normally have great news value and attract large audiences. Scandals and crisis processes deviate from the more structured campaign context and thus have significant potential to shift existing power relations. But as is the case in other crisis situations, skilled crisis management and carefully selected response strategies may work in favour of the exposed political party or candidate.

Finally, it is relevant to consider cultural dimensions of political communication processes. As the traditional left-right–wing political scale has become slightly less important in the Nordic region, conflict patterns rooted in cultural perspectives and values prove to be useful for understanding development of public opinion and debate. As concluded by Kristensen and Roosvall in this anthology, cultural journalism in the Nordic countries obviously matters for political opinion. This is particularly true for topics that do not follow established political conflict patterns. A typical example is the global debate on sexual

harassment initiated by the so-called #metoo movement in 2017 that, to a large extent, was driven by cultural journalists and followed up by news departments and political journalists. The issue remained on top of the political agenda for a long time – especially in Norway and Sweden – and had considerable impact on public life. For example, such scandals related to the Royal Swedish Academy were the reason why no Nobel Prize in literature was declared in 2018.

Change and continuity factors

The above discussion on politics, media, and voter power relations brings us back to the basic – and in Nordic political communication research, often repeated – question of whether a Nordic model of political communication exists today or not. The overall conclusion that can be drawn from the contributions in this anthology is that it is hardly relevant to talk about a clear-cut Nordic model of political communication that highly contrasts other democratic states and their political communication systems. To a considerable extent, global trends such as the digitalisation and commercialisation of media systems and blurring lines between national and global political issues influence and affect political communication conditions in the Nordic countries. Thus, it makes sense to assume that transnational factors are becoming increasingly important when analysing contemporary developments and changes in Nordic societies.

Still, there are many observations in previous chapters that point in other directions and actually confirm the existence of prevailing Nordic system peculiarities. The Nordic region is somewhat of a democratic role model with comparably higher levels of voter turnout and political trust, relatively strong private and public news media, and an audience still willing to pay for news (Newman et al., 2019). Lobbying works within another political context, fake news concerns are not referred to as a main problem, and local journalism is still characterised by professional values, just to mention some of the conclusions from chapters in this anthology that support the idea of a more specific Nordic political communication model (see the country-specific Chapters 2–6; Lindén et al., Chapter 8; Kalsnes et al., Chapter 14; and Ihlen et al., Chapter 15).

So most correctly, international transformation driving changes and national distinctive features supporting continuity seem to merge when political communication systems are developing in the Nordic countries, as well as in other democracies. This mixture of external influences and internal conditions is also often referred to in political communication research literature (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Norris, 2002; Syvertsen et al., 2014). In contrast, the simple idea of a strong convergence of political communication systems all over the world is criticised. Calls are issued for more sophisticated hypotheses about possible changes (Hallin & Mancini, 2014). Previous systematic analyses of

political communication in Scandinavia have also observed the dynamic interplay between global convergence processes and national political culture, media systems, and traditions (Aagard & Blach-Örsten, 2018; Ihlen et al., 2015; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018).

While this cautious conclusion of merging characteristics makes sense, it is relevant to look more carefully upon factors in the Nordic countries that seem to contribute to continuity and stability in political communication systems and with potential to limit the effects of external influences. In our view, it is particularly interesting to pay attention to relevant factors in the Nordic countries that may contribute to resilience in these societies.

The notion of resilience is not much discussed in political communication, despite its potential to explain how and why some societies are successful as inclusive, innovative, and secure societies, also in times of crises and change. Social resilience can be defined as "the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it" (Hall & Lamont, 2013: 2). Resilience is the capacity of a society to deal with issues such as the above, and being stable democracies, the Nordic countries have a good track record in handling societal challenges. While processes of globalisation might be said to contribute to convergence, it has also been argued that a certain national resilience can be found and attributed to both tradition and culture (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012).

For example, a comparative study of 18 countries concluded that a consensual cluster of countries, including the Nordic countries, showed a higher resilience to online disinformation. Within this cluster, countries were marked by a lower level of polarisation and populism communication, high levels of media trust and shared news consumption, and strong public service media. These countries seemed to be well equipped to face the challenges of the digital information age because they have stable, trusted institutions that enable citizens to obtain independent information and uncover manipulation attempts. The countries in this cluster are not yet affected to a large extent by the problem of online disinformation. However, it is possible that this will change in the future and that online disinformation will become a greater threat (Humprecht et al., 2020).

The various contributions to this anthology do suggest some possible factors that may be central for the understanding of resilience in the Nordic countries. Basic democratic indicators such as voter turnout and public trust are comparably high, public service media have a strong position in national media systems, and there is an inclusion of ethnic and cultural groups in decision-making structures.

International comparisons of how "democratic" different nations are have also reflected on other characteristics of the Nordic countries: they are small and wealthy states with long-established democratic traditions. Electoral systems are

more consensual than majoritarian, and taxes and welfare state expenditures are relatively high with some state intervention in the economy. Even if there is not one single perfect democratic model, one author states that "it might be tentatively argued that the odds of a strong democracy enduring might be improved if following the Scandinavian template" (Davis, 2019: 212).

So far, the Nordic countries have shown considerable ability to embrace international political communication trends without jeopardising essential nation-specific distinctive features. Whether this resilience will prevail in the future remains an open question and depends on the further strength of global democratic changes, the magnitude of future crises and challenges in modern societies, and their implications for existing power relations and political communication systems in the North.

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