The Media Welfare State

Why such a concept, what is it used for, does it have a future?

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Abstract

In 2014, Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, and Moe authored *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in a Digital Era* to explore the specificities of Nordic media and the analogy between welfare state and media structures. In this short article, we point to how selected works challenge or extend the notions of a media welfare state beyond the original analysis. We begin by placing the work in a tradition of comparative and typology-generating scholarship and point to parallel works emerging at the same time. We then highlight others' contributions in order to identify tendencies in Nordic media and research. In conclusion, we use examples from current research to argue that changes in the media system may be studied from both the angle of changing media policies and that of changing welfare states.

Keywords: Nordic, welfare state, media policy, typology, comparative

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, international interest in Nordic art, culture, and lifestyle has grown alongside the traditional interest in Nordic social policies. Nordic-fans across the world appreciate everything from black metal music to furniture, #Nordicphile has become a twitter hashtag, and Nordic nation-branders have gleefully responded with self-celebratory titles such as *Nordicana: 100 Icons of Scandi Culture & Nordic Cool* (Kinsella, 2015) and *The Little Book of Lykke – Secrets of the Worlds Happiest People* (Wiking, 2018). But the idolisation of all things Nordic has also prompted counter narratives such as *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: The Truth About the Nordic Miracle* (Booth, 2014) and *Debunking Utopia: Exposing the Myth of Nordic Socialism* (Sanandaji, 2016). Opposing evaluations of the Nordic model also serve as evidence in political arguments beyond Nordic borders, for example in polarised debates between Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

In 2014, we were part of a team that published the book *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in a Digital Era* (Syvertsen et al., 2014). When we started the work in the early 2010s, the new Nordic interest had not extended to media, although the international success of television series such as *The Killing* began to warrant academic attention (see, for example, Hansen & Waade, 2017). Half a decade has passed since *The Media Welfare State* was published, and in this article, we review some uses of the concept it was named after. The short space available does not allow for an in-depth discussion of contributions; hence, our aim is only to highlight some tendencies in Nordic media and research through the narrow lens of one single term. According to Google Scholar, more than 200 works have cited the concept of a media welfare state so far, and we discuss how selected works challenge or extend the notions of it beyond the original analysis. In conclusion, we point to our current research to argue that changes in the media system may be studied from the angles of both media policy and changing welfare states.

The media welfare state – why such a concept?

The study of the media welfare state stands in the tradition of comparative and typology-generating media scholarship. In their seminal work, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) classified Western media systems as polarised pluralist, democratic corporatist, or liberal; the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland cluster in one corner of their illustrative triangle as the most archetypical democratic corporatist systems. Like *Comparing Media Systems*, *The Media Welfare State* also drew on comparative statistics, historical features, and analyses of media structures and institutions, but the primary aim was not to compare the Nordics with other regions. Instead, the objective was to investigate similarities between Nordic systems and highlight the analogy between Nordic welfare state measures and media structures and norms. A central argument (which perhaps could have been more explicit) was that Nordic governments had not been particularly innovative or creative in designing media policies, in contrast, for example, to the British. Instead, proposals and solutions in the media field were drawn from tried-and-true solutions in the realm of welfare state policy. Hence, we wanted to make a bid for a less media-centred analysis and argue that changes in media systems could also be understood in the light of welfare state developments. Moreover, a key argument was that the field of welfare state studies had often neglected the media's role (for longer-term historical analysis, see Enli et al., 2018).

The media welfare state was described in the book as a tentative concept encompassing four pillars or principles: 1) an organisation of vital communication services that underscore their character as public goods; 2) a range of measures used to institutionalise freedom from editorial interference; 3) a cultural policy that extends to the media; and 4) a preference for consensual solutions that are

durable and involve cooperation between main stakeholders (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 17). The book argued that these organisational principles deeply impacted media structures but did not originate in the media field. Furthermore, it argued that changes in the (early phase of) the digital era did not eradicate these features; instead, principles were adapted to respond to new challenges.

Immediately after the manuscript was submitted, other works appeared that were relevant for the study, also inspired by Hallin and Mancini (2004). In his report on Nordic media markets, Ohlsson (2015) stressed change more than continuity, and argued that the democratic corporatist characteristics of the Nordic countries were evaporating, except within public service broadcasting. A second study pointed in a different direction and deemed Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland a distinct cluster with persistent characteristics (Brüggemann et al., 2014). These authors defined a "Northern type" of media system, with Norway as its prototype and characterised by an inclusive press market, generous press subsidies, and powerful public broadcasting. Along with other contributions, the authors of these studies rose to the challenge posed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and asked to what degree Western media systems converged towards the liberal model – a question Hallin and Mancini also returned to at later intervals – their answer veering towards a "no" (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

The media welfare state – what is it used for?

The concept of the media welfare state has, since its launch, been debated, extended, and commented upon in print, conferences, and seminars.[1] According to Google Scholar, 236 works (as of 23 May 2020) have cited the concept over the last five years.[2] Space here does not allow a thorough examination of these works; instead, we start with a few general comments on thematic focus based on keywords and abstracts of studies citing the media welfare state concept. Then we turn to specific works for a closer reading of arguments that challenge the framework or extend the concept.[3]

The broad survey of keywords and abstracts in works citing the concept points to three overarching observations about research on Nordic media systems. First, there seems to be a consensus that it is crucial to study continuity as well as change, although terms emphasising changes, challenges, innovations, and transformations dominate. Second, there seems to be an increasing awareness that developments vary between countries and that not all media systems follow the liberal model, indicated by an emphasis on the peculiarities of small states, the democratic corporatist model, and Nordic specificities. Third, there is a distinct and continuing tendency to discuss Nordic media systems, not as a sector by itself but with societal implications; hence terms such as public media, public sphere, media commons, inequalities, trust, social, political, and democracy.

From this overview, we select some works to indicate how the concept of the media welfare state is challenged and expanded beyond the original analysis.

First, we note how several studies suggest spin-offs of the concept or extend it to new sectors, thereby nuancing the complex relationship between social goals and economic realities. For example, Ala-Fosi and colleagues (2019) use media welfare state as a point of departure for their concept of a digital welfare state, targeted to describe how Finland aims to secure citizens' online communication rights. The article demonstrates how national policy decisions may support economic goals rather than communication rights, and argues that measures to realise citizens' rights may not always translate into desired outcomes, such as inclusive participation in decision-making.

Jørgensen and colleagues (2017) extend the framework to include the gaming industry – an industry not included in the original analysis. They argue that the presence of what they define as the demoscene – a hobbyist subculture originating in early home-computer culture and the software-piracy scene – had significant influence on game companies. Even though the transition from hobbyism to professionalism was not straightforward, the demoscene was essential for game companies, as they would otherwise have struggled to recruit qualified employees. This argument broadens the scope of media welfare state analysis to include subcultures and how new sectors are drawn into established frameworks.

In the article "A Welfare State of Mind?", Ahva and colleagues (2017) use the concept to discuss to what degree there are differences in mentality and professional identity between Nordic and non-Nordic journalists. The findings indicate that Nordic journalists share a vision of their professional identity – first and foremost in the role of watchdogs and renouncing the role as opportunist facilitators – and that journalists' professional views reflect the characteristics of the political culture and media systems in which they work.

Yet another extension of the term is suggested by Engelstad and colleagues (2017), who argue that the concept of the media welfare state illuminates the structure of the public sphere as a whole. They include arts and cultural production, voluntary organisations, research, higher education, and religion in their analysis. They argue that the Nordic countries are inclined to broaden the public sphere to make it more inclusive and that a strong state and a well-developed system of checks and balances are essential in this process.

The second point we want to make is how the concept is used as a contrast case in comparative studies, and particularly in discussions of how media contribute to society. In some of these studies, the notion of a media welfare state becomes a bit idealised, running the risk of becoming one-dimensional and turning into its own cliché. In most contributions, however, the media welfare state serves as a useful point of reference, both for large-scale and more limited comparative designs. For example, Benson and colleagues (2017) use the media welfare state for comparative purposes and argue that the Nordic region is exemplary by regulating the media in nonpartisan terms, resulting in a higher degree of autonomy and accountability than less-regulated media systems. McElroy and colleagues (2019) use the media welfare state to explain variations between media regulation

in small European countries in a study of Welsh broadcasting policies, referring to how the Nordic region has a more extensive policy for public media compared to other small countries. Parallelly, Bonini (2017) refers to the media welfare state as a best-practice model for public service media, recognised by independence, quality, and cultural diversity.

A third point concerns how a large bulk of research cites the concept of the media welfare state in the context of changes in media structures and the degree to which its characteristics remain. In their collected volume, Nørgaard Kristensen and Riegert (2017) use the concept to discuss continuity versus change in cultural journalism – the contributions confirming a degree of continuity in terms of an inclusive and egalitarian approach to cultural journalism. Another example of research investigating to what degree the characteristics of the media welfare state belongs more in the past than the present is Kammer (2016). He points out how European Union trade policy imposes restrictions on what the state can do in terms of subsidising actors operating in a commercial market, hence highlighting the impact of European policies. Also, Allern and Pollack discuss potential implications of reduced public funding of Nordic journalism; their focus is how the emergence of new business models are weakening the "old marriage between news and advertising" (2019: 1436).

Some of the above contributions argue that the concept of the media welfare state is becoming less adequate or does not grasp fundamental changes in the media system. In addition, some studies point to unsatisfactory or understudied aspects of the original analysis. One crucial dimension concerns class differences and whether the initial analysis glossed over this aspect. Lindell and Hovden (2018) analyse inequalities between media use in Sweden and argue that the metaphor of "social glue" should be replaced with that of distinct "audience islands" whose populations continuously draw boundaries between each other – not least via their distinct media repertoires (see also the extensive analysis in Moe et al., 2019).

A second example of an aspect which arguably could have been more emphasised is physical characteristics, such as country size and typography, and historical infrastructures. Flensburg and Lai (2019) argue that characteristics associated with media welfare states should not solely be analysed as reflections of institutional features or ideological traditions, but also as dependent on material conditions such as geography, demography, and infrastructure development. The article suggests that studies of media systems should include the specific infrastructures that digital systems are based on, because this is elementary for explaining the quantitative differences between countries in terms of Internet quality and use.

The last example of an understudied aspect is the role of Iceland and to what degree it resembles other Nordic countries – a question which received scant treatment in the initial investigation. Guðmundsson and Kristinsson (2019) offer a more thorough discussion and argue that Iceland could be defined as a media welfare state, given that three out of four pillars of the media welfare state are present in Iceland. The only pillar not found in Iceland is the state's interventions

to secure communication and media as a universal public good. While this is a useful point, it is also worth noting that the pillars in the original analysis are not exclusively Nordic (as many discussants have underlined) and that welfare states come in different shapes and forms. Hence, the criterion of universalism was important for the initial analysis.

The media welfare state – does it have a future?

Above, we discussed a range of contexts where the concept of the media welfare state is included and pointed to ways that the framework has been challenged and extended. Our limited analysis cannot give a proper answer to the usefulness of the framework (and as authors this is not our role). However, we observe that the media welfare state may function as a point of departure for (Nordic) media systems analyses and a point of reference in broader debates about how media systems are changing. In the same way as other ideal-type concepts, the media welfare state is also used both descriptively, to indicate specific structures and policies, and normatively, to indicate which features of the media system are worth preserving.

In conclusion, we wish to return to the argument in the introduction about the strong links between the welfare state and the media system. We are often asked whether we are concerned about changes in the media system, as if our premise was that it should all be kept exactly as it is (or was). In these cases, we argue that a key feature of Nordic welfare states is their *adaptability*, the fact that they have arrangements (such as cooperation between stakeholders) to facilitate change without sacrificing essential principles (such as universal access or editorial freedom). Hence, an important aim was to demonstrate how some principles were resilient despite profound changes. However, we acknowledge that the original analysis may not have been sufficiently precise. As anyone working with systemic and ideal types will have experienced, the concepts tend to be slippery and can always be criticised for lacking in precision; both the welfare state and the media welfare state are contested concepts as indicated in the introduction, and how the concepts are viewed also says something about how one views realities.

Following the arguments above, the second point in this conclusion is to highlight observations from more recent research; specifically, to cite some findings from our ongoing projects to discuss whether Nordic systems remain distinct and whether "welfarist" characteristics still prevail. Also, the main point is to emphasise that media systems can be studied both from the angle of changes in media structures and the angle of change in welfare state mentalities. Two projects – both going beyond the most typical areas of media welfare state studies, such as press subsidies or public service broadcasting – can illuminate the differences.

The first project, "Private Media and the Public Interest", compares how private media CEOs in Norway and Flanders conceptualise the public interest. This

study focuses explicitly on mentalities in the private sector, based on interviews with CEOs of publishers, television, production, telecom infrastructure, and online initiatives. The study shows that challenges perceived were similar in the two media markets, which can both be characterised as democratic corporatist (Donders et al., 2018). However, the way the CEOs spoke about the public interest in the two markets veered towards different polarities; while Norwegian CEOs tended to point to public interest values (e.g., the duty to raise standards and educate the public as part of their rationale), the Flemish CEOs were more concerned about brand development (Syvertsen et al., 2019). In a similar vein, Norwegian CEOs of private media companies were more positive and satisfied with their cooperation with policy-makers and held a more positive view of public service media than their Flemish counterparts (Enli et al., 2019). Hence, a "welfare state of mind" (Ahva et al., 2017) seems to influence CEOs of private media companies in a Norwegian setting. However, also in the Norwegian context, there were variations. Most notably was that CEOs of online journalism initiatives were more cynical about the degree to which private Norwegian media assumed societal responsibility compared to CEOs of more traditional enterprises.

While the first project's point of departure is changes and challenges in media structures, the second project departs from changes in welfare state mentalities. The research project "Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox"[4] departs from the idea of responsibilisation; meaning that welfare state policies increasingly place responsibility for managing societal problems on individuals rather than society. Within this tradition, studies such as Pyysiäinen and colleagues (2017) contrasts the role played by welfarist conceptions, calling for regulation or political solutions, with more individualistic conceptions where "you have the problem and you have to handle it". The project draws on media texts and interviews with activists for digital detox and disconnection, and so far, a tendency in the material is that intrusive digital media are seen primarily as a problem for individuals, rather than an issue that warrants political solutions (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). These observations fit with a more general point argued in many books and articles – that the type of expectations traditionally levied at mass media companies are not to any great extent transferred to social media and digital platforms.

The observations in this short article cannot do justice to the many studies dealing with changes in media policy and structure. Nevertheless, based on the arguments we have reviewed as well as our own projects, we will, in conclusion, uphold the argument that there are fruitful grounds for research in the interplay between media and welfare state studies. In the long run, changes in media structures cannot be properly understood without an adjacent analysis of how welfare states mentalities and arrangements evolve (see also Engelstad et al., 2017; Moe et al., 2019).

Notes

1. We are grateful to commentators, discussants, and critics. The concept was discussed in an ICA and a Nordic Media Network preconference, both in 2019. The book has been reviewed by scholars in seven peer-reviewed journals; among the more critical reviews was that of Picard (2015) who argued that the authors were normative and the book did not grasp the changes in Nordic media.
2. This includes citations in works by the authors, mostly in works co-written with non-authors.
3. We are grateful for the systematic data gathering by research assistant Roy Aulie Jacobsen.
4. Digitox, funded by the Norwegian Research Council, 2019–2023.

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