

# Communication rights and the Nordic epistemic commons

*Assessing the media welfare state in the age of information disorder*

MINNA HOROWITZ<sup>I</sup> & HANNU NIEMINEN<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup> MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

<sup>II</sup> DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY, LITHUANIA;  
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

## ABSTRACT

Information disorder occurs when the fact-based, reliable, and professionally validated provision of information becomes confronted by information that attacks previously trusted media platforms, disputes the known or scientifically validated facts, or uses rumours and gossip as sources. Information disorder intensifies during turbulent times, as evidenced by the global rise of xenophobic movements, disbelief in science, and belief in conspiracies. Although Nordic countries fare remarkably well by many measures that assess democratic and robust communication environments, they also face these challenges. In this chapter, we view the Nordic media welfare state as ideally entailing an epistemic commons – a shared forum for trustworthy knowledge and culture – that supports citizens' communication rights of access to and availability of diverse content, as well as privacy and dialogical public communication. Based on these key principles embedded in the Nordic media welfare state model, we assess its present condition by employing the framework of communication rights as our analytical tool. We argue that rights-based approaches in policy and practice are essential if a Nordic digital media welfare state is to be realised and maintained.

**KEYWORDS:** information disorder, epistemic commons, communication rights, framework

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## Introduction

In their seminal book, *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) proposed the concept of the Nordic media welfare state, which covers media systems and the media environment in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). The well-known model of the Nordic welfare state (e.g., Andersen et al., 2007; Nordic Co-operation, 2022; Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017) is used in the book to argue that, in the construction, production, and reproduction of this model, the role of the Nordic media is much understudied and in need of recognition. Consequently, Syvertsen and colleagues analysed the relationship between the media and wider society in the Nordic countries. Adopting earlier research as their starting point, including Hallin and Mancini's (2004) influential analysis of different media systems in the West, and by using a great number of new empirical materials, they aimed to establish the active role of the Nordic media in the construction and continuing production and reproduction of the Nordic social welfare state model.

The media welfare state included four principles: communication services that underscore their character as public goods, measures to institutionalise press freedom, cultural policy that includes the media, and cooperation between main stakeholders (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2014; see also Schröder et al., Chapter 1). Underlying these principles is the Nordic tradition of the so-called epistemic commons, that is, the ideals of knowledge and culture as a citizen-centric, restriction-free shared domain that ultimately enables informed citizenship (Nieminen, 2014).

Still, there are growing concerns about the Nordic media systems being able to function as media welfare states, and, more broadly, about the Nordic democratic debate in the digital era. The worries do not only concern new and emerging technologies, foreign information interference, or media business viability challenged by global conglomerates (e.g., Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, 2022). Lately, the discussions have also addressed the entire media systems and institutional manifestations of the media welfare states, such as public service media and media and information literacy efforts. For example, the Nordic Council of Ministers set up a Think Tank for Tech and Democracy (2022–2023) to suggest how to safeguard democratic debate in the Nordics. The preface of the final report of the Think Tank states the following:

The Nordic countries are exceptional.

We have incredible levels of trust in each other. We have a strong tradition of open public debate, where everyone can make themselves heard. We fiercely believe in the freedom of speech. And we have citizens who are generally well-informed and well-equipped to participate in public debate.

We have so much to celebrate and so much to preserve.

While social media hold great democratic potential, we have also, in recent years, seen how platforms not only enable democratic debate but also impact it negatively. The spread of false information online, whether intentional or not, threatens factual common ground. The use of offensive language prevents some groups in society from joining democratic debates. And opaque algorithms have spurred political polarisation.

(Bornakke, 2023)

Indeed, as also aptly summarised by Ala-Fossi, Lehtisaari, and Neuvonen (Chapter 5), a decade after Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) published the Nordic media welfare state analysis, the model is showing several cracks. One central challenge is how the Nordic media has responded to the changes brought about by digitalisation, especially in the form of increasing circulation of different types of false and harmful information (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020.) The ideal of the epistemic commons as a feature of the Nordic media welfare state is shrinking with what could be called information disorder, that is, all forms of false and misleading information created purposefully for profit or to provoke social conflicts (Benkler et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The provision of both accidentally shared as well as purposely created and distributed dis- and misinformation intensifies during turbulent times, as evidenced by the global rise of xenophobic movements, disbelief in science (including climate change and vaccination), and belief in conspiracies (Swami & Furnham, 2014).

The term information disorder highlights the social and political structures, preconditions, and practices that produce and facilitate the circulation of disinformation, which make some societies, media structures in societies, and subpopulations in those societies vulnerable to false and misleading information (e.g., Horowitz, 2019). Information disorder occurs when fact-based, reliable, and professionally validated provision of information becomes confronted by information that attacks previously trusted media platforms, disputes the known or scientifically validated facts, or uses rumours and gossip as sources. This is closely linked with the processes and practices of platformisation, that is, the deep transformations that the continuing expansion of digital platforms has brought about in infrastructures, economy, administration, politics, and culture (see Poell et al., 2019). As is evident in several research efforts (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2021; Jørgensen, 2021; Sirkkunen et al., 2021), the power of the platforms in the Nordic communication environments challenges the structures, practices, and rights of the mass media era.

Today, information disorder expands globally, manifesting itself, for example, as online conspiracy theories, viral disinformation around Covid-19, and digitally enabled war propaganda by Russia about its attack on Ukraine. The spread of false, untrustworthy content is greatly facilitated by the functional

logic of the global social media platforms. This is another related development of the digital era that chips away at the foundations of the Nordic media welfare state. Both in its international and localised forms, information disorder has become a real challenge to Nordic countries (e.g., Astapova et al., 2021; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, 2022). In this chapter, we ask the following:

- RQ. How has the Nordic media welfare state, in its digital form, been able, in this context, to maintain an epistemic commons?

We assess the strengths and challenges of the Nordic countries in light of comparative empirical data, focusing on an essential foundation of the Nordic media welfare state, namely, with an analytical framework focusing on citizens' communication rights.

## **A communication rights approach to epistemic commons**

To respond to the question of whether an epistemic commons is possible in today's Nordic societies, this chapter employs a rights-based framework to depict and evaluate the state of four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – in the era of information disorder. The focus on rights is based on the policy debates and initiatives of recent years that have surrounded the role of global platforms in realising or violating principles such as freedom of expression or privacy, which are already stipulated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (e.g., Zuboff, 2019). Various groups have made efforts to monitor and influence the global policy landscape, including the United Nations and civil society actors (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2016). At the same time, nation-states are still powerful actors whose choices can make a difference in the realisation of rights (Flew et al., 2016).

From the perspective of the European Union, a rights-based approach has become increasingly central in supporting European democratic ideals, including democratic communication environments. In the European Union, the basic elements are already anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Parliament, 2000). A 2021 Eurobarometer survey found that more than eight in ten respondents thought it would be useful for the European Commission (2021a) to define and promote a common European vision of digital rights and principles. A need to emphasise a rights-based approach founded on established human rights principles, and applied in different contexts, can also be seen in the recent European Union policy initiatives tackling information disorder (e.g., Hoboken & Ó Fathaig, 2021). These include The 2020 European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission 2020b; see also European Commission, 2020a), the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022a) and

subsequent Guidance to strengthen the Code of Practice (European Commission, 2021b), the 2022 Digital Services Act Package (European Commission, n.d.), The European Media Freedom Act (a political agreement reached in 2024; European Commission, 2023) – and The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (European Commission, 2022b). It should also be noted that while not all Nordic countries are bound by these initiatives, they are de facto adopting, or following closely, the European Union policy approaches. For instance, the non-member state Norway, discussed in this chapter, participates in various European Union initiatives that pertain to the Union’s digital agenda and takes part in the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (Delegation of the European Union to Norway, 2021).

In this chapter, we employ a basic model that divides the notion of communication rights into four distinct operational categories (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019; Horowitz & Nieminen, 2016; Nieminen, 2014, 2019). These divisions differ from other categorisations (Couldry et al., 2016; Goggin et al., 2017) in that they specifically reflect the ideal of the epistemic commons of shared knowledge and culture. Communication rights, then, should both preserve, and remove restrictions, on the epistemic commons.

The framework focuses on citizens’ capabilities to participate in society in a highly digitalised environment and on the challenges and opportunities for key stakeholders to support those capabilities. The framework positions citizens’ rights towards information and communication, based on international human rights principles, at the centre of a democratic, sustainable digital media environment. These same rights are embedded in the ideal of the Nordic media welfare state, given that communication is considered central to citizens’ capabilities to foster their well-being. In today’s context, rights-based approaches to communication entail the need to diminish the harms of information disorder. According to the framework used in this chapter, communication rights include the following (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019):

1. Access: citizens’ equal access to technology and other means of access to information, orientation, entertainment, and self-expression.
2. Availability: equal availability of various types of content (information, orientation, entertainment, or other) for citizens; availability of truthful journalistic content.
3. Privacy: protection of every citizen’s private life from unwanted publicity. This also includes the protection of personal data against microtargeting and other information disorders.
4. Dialogical rights: the existence of public spaces that allow citizens to publicly share information, experiences, views, and opinions on common matters.

## Communication rights, the Nordic epistemic commons, and information disorder: An empirical overview

At the outset, even if the realisation of the Nordic media welfare state has been approached with caution (e.g., Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2021), the media welfare state still seems to be understood and supported (Lindell et al., 2021). To be sure, many indicators verify that these countries have preserved quite robust and pluralistic national media landscapes. Nevertheless, if the model of communication rights is used to assess the situation in the Nordics, these countries also face important challenges brought about by information disorder.

To discuss how communication rights of access, availability, privacy, and dialogicality are realised in the Nordic countries, and how they indicate resilience to disinformation (e.g., Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021), we deploy our rights-based model by analysing the level of implementation by the public sector, as manifested in the level of activity by both legacy media and communications technology providers and citizen-consumers. This multi-level analysis aims to depict the complex nature of the rights and often contradictory realisations at different dimensions. Both the strengths and risks of the Nordics are depicted in the following with empirical evidence, based on Open Access statistics and indices.

### *Public sector and legacy media: Robust structures*

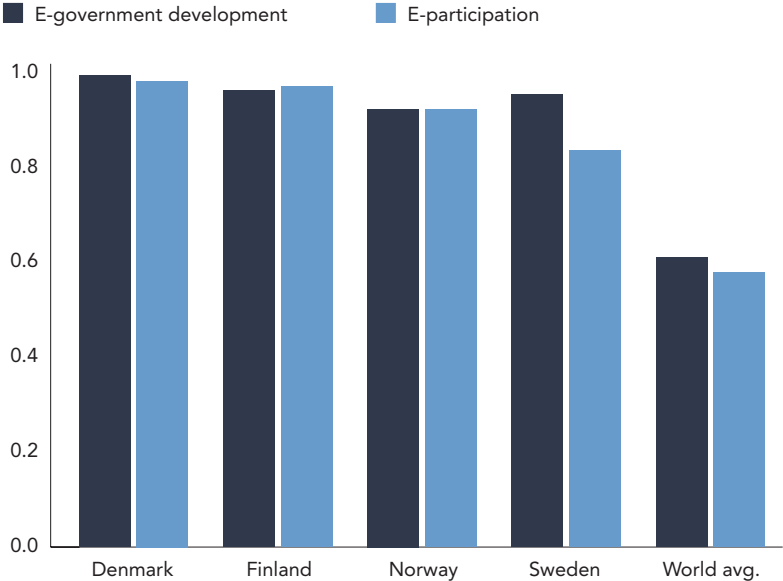
Nordic countries fare remarkably well with many measures that assess democratic and robust communication environments. In terms of *access* as a communication right, for instance, in 2022, the percentage of households with Internet access ranged from 94 per cent in Finland and 96 per cent in Sweden to 98 per cent in Denmark and Norway (Newman et al., 2022). This is coupled with avid use of mobile communication, with mobile phone subscriptions per capita ranging from 1.14 in Norway to 1.44 in Denmark (PST, 2020). This level of access is greatly due to national policies to enhance digitalisation (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Regarding *availability*, Nordic countries are known for robust national media markets. Although they are challenged by the necessity of rethinking journalism and content creation business models and have faced a notable decline in advertising revenue due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these markets still feature strong national media outlets that are both highly consumed and trusted. Part of this is the national, policy-driven principle of supporting journalism and the media in the form of funding public service organisations, as well as by other support mechanisms. Accordingly, during crises such as Covid-19, audiences turn to the national media, especially public broadcasting, for trusted information (Ohlsson et al., 2021).

Another indicator of the robust availability is that the four countries in this study continuously occupy top places in the Press Freedom Ranking by Reporters Without Borders. In 2023, Norway took first place, Denmark third, Sweden fourth, and Finland fifth (RSF, 2023). The context of free speech is echoed in several rankings of the state of democracy, including measures of civil liberties and media freedom (e.g., Boese et al., 2022; EIU, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Digital Society Project (Mechkova et al., 2022), these countries also excel in online content diversity and are free from undue governmental influence on the Internet. As for *privacy*, all these countries regulate privacy in data protection, e-transactions, consumer protection, and cybercrime (UNCTAD, 2021).

In our framework, the idea of dialogical rights entails the premise of the ability to be heard and represented and to participate in common important discussions and decisions. This understanding of dialogicality implies the presence of trust in institutions, communicative possibilities, the information received, and one another. In the Nordics, institutional trust is strong: OECD (2022) data on the percentage of people who trust their governments indicates remarkably high global figures, ranging from 67 per cent in Sweden to 83 per cent in Norway. In terms of citizens' participation in society, the United Nations E-Government Development Index (UN, 2020a) and E-Participation Index (UN, 2020b) again illustrate a strong foundation in digital means of dialogicality between citizens and the state. The UN E-Government Index measures how information technologies are used to promote access and inclusion, whereas the E-Participation Index indicates how online services facilitate citizens' access to information dissemination, interaction, and engagement in decision-making processes. As Figure 4.1 shows, trust in abilities for societal participation and related opportunities in digital forms seem notably strong in the global context: The rankings place the Nordic countries in the top-20 of a total of 193 countries, with Denmark leading the e-government development ranking. Also according to the European Digital Economy and Society Index, the Nordic countries take most of the top positions as digital nations (Harrie, 2021).

**Figure 4.1** United Nations e-government development and e-participation scores, Nordic countries and world average, 2020 (range: 0–1)



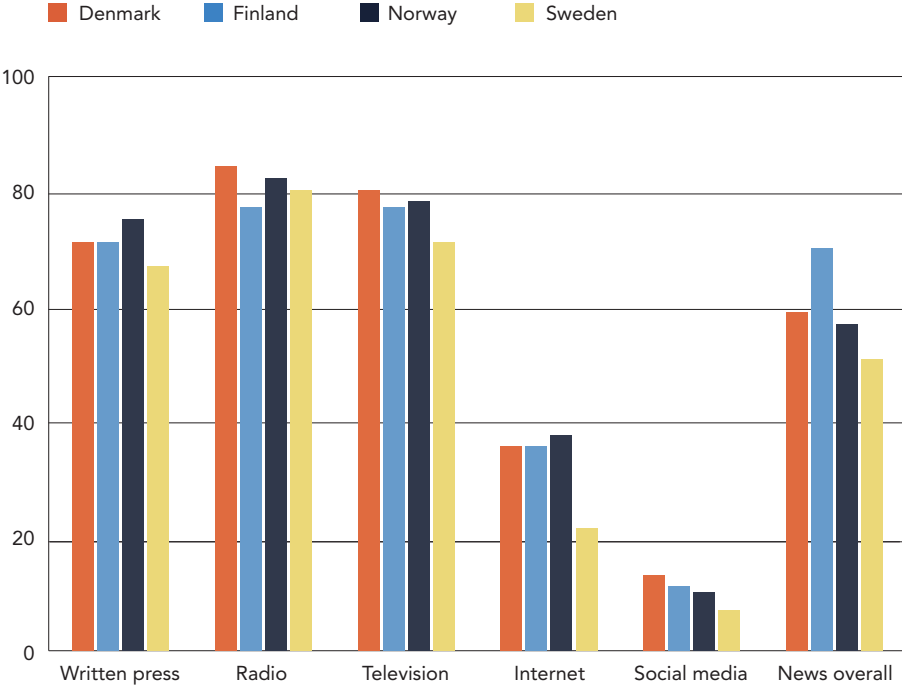
SOURCE: UN, 2020a, 2020b

**Citizen-consumers: Robust trust**

In addition to the policies and media structures that support the media welfare state, the Nordic countries embody trust in legacy forms of media as mediators of information and arenas of debate – even in the global context of diminishing societal and media trust. For example, in Europe in 2022, trust in television news ranged from 82 per cent in Iceland to a mere 26 per cent in Greece. The global average of trust in news in all media, based on 44 media markets, was 42 per cent in 2022. In contrast, in the Nordic countries examined in this chapter, it ranged from 50 per cent in Sweden to 69 per cent in Finland. Conversely, trust in social media and news via social media was remarkably low in the Nordic countries (see Figure 4.2). There was also very little variation between these countries, whereas in Europe, trust in social media ranged from 42 per cent in Poland to 7 per cent in Sweden (Eurobarometer, 2022).



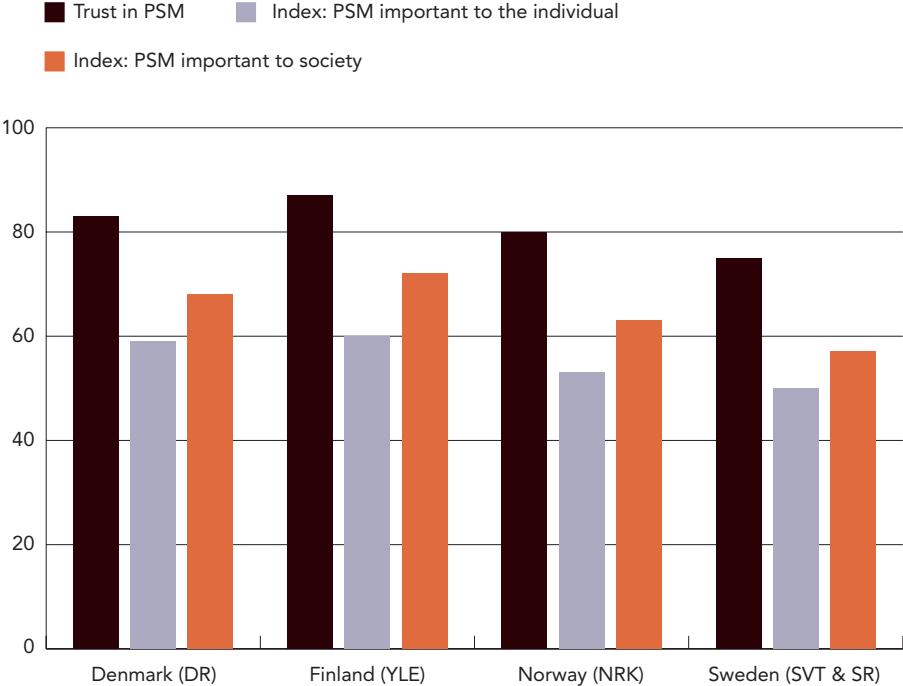
**Figure 4.2** Trust in types of media and news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2021 (per cent)



SOURCE: Eurobarometer, 2022; Newman et al., 2022

Overall, in the Nordic countries, the levels of trust in news media have remained at a relatively high level and even slightly increased in Norway and Sweden from the mid-2010s to 2022 (Newman et al., 2022). Public service media are a key feature in these media systems and are the most trusted news brand in each country. Trust equals reach: Public service media organisations are among the most popular news, both online and offline (Newman et al., 2022). Yet another dimension of public service media in the Nordic countries is the high regard of the importance of public service media organisations in the respective societies. In a study of 19 countries around the world (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023), Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden ranked the highest in terms of audiences’ trust and their perceptions of personal and societal importance of public service media (see Figure 4.3), and this suggests, as others have also argued, that these organisations support key normative foundations of media welfare in the Nordics (Jakobsson et al., 2023).

**Figure 4.3** Trust in public service media and the net importance index (per cent)



COMMENTS: PSM = public service media. Net importance is the proportion (%) who answered public service media is important minus the proportion who answered it is unimportant (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

SOURCE: Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023

All these statistics speak to certain similarities between the Nordic countries, at least in terms of the relative stability of the national media landscape and the broad culture of (mediated) trust. These findings are coupled with the cluster analysis of the annual Media Literacy Index (Lessenski, 2022) that combines press freedom rankings with the scores of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the proportion of the population with university degrees, statistics on interpersonal trust, and citizens’ e-participation. The result is the same: Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, together with Estonia, receive the top scores, with the conclusion that these countries have the highest potential to withstand the negative impact of disinformation (Norway was not included in this analysis). Furthermore, the Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in the EU-28 report (EAO, 2017) and an analysis of Nordic approaches to media literacy in the Nordic media welfare states (Forsman, 2020) confirm that Nordic countries host a wide array of stakeholders, ranging from specific organisations with statutory responsibilities to audiovisual stakeholders, such as public service media organisations and numerous civil society actors and initiatives. These find-

ings of citizen-consumers' activities and competencies point to a prominent level of the realisation of communication rights and a functioning epistemic commons where those rights are exercised.

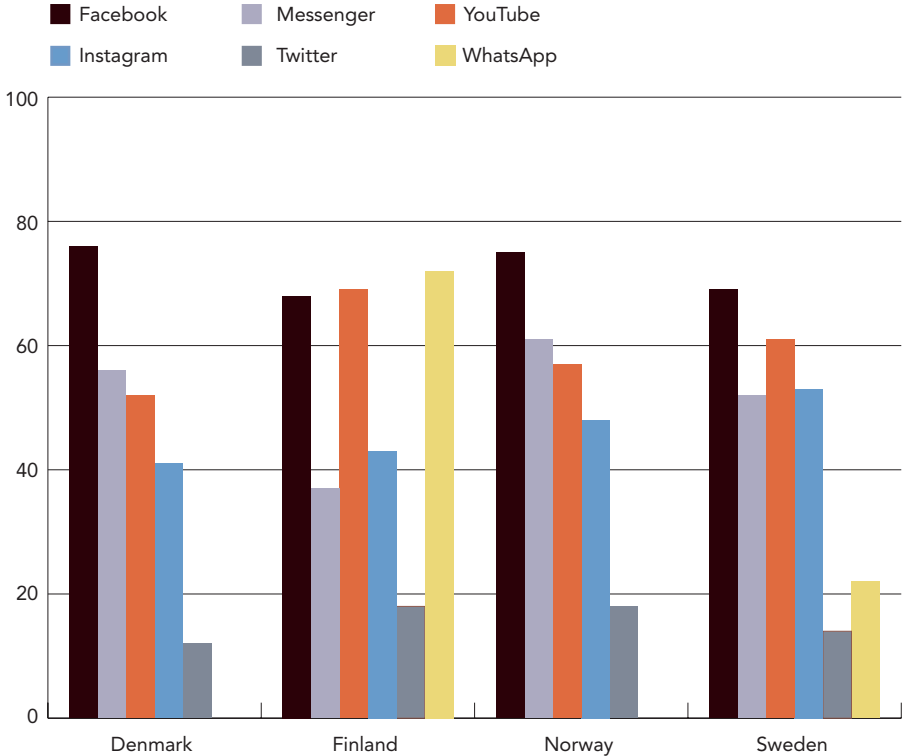
More generally, given the above figures, it is not unsurprising that a research effort to discover structural resilience to online disinformation in 18 countries (Humphrecht et al., 2020) placed Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden among the most resilient. Based on seven indices constructed from various comparative statistics as indicators of political, economic, and media environments, the study found three clusters of countries: resilient, challenged/polarised, and extremely vulnerable. The Nordic countries have resilient, media-supportive environments defined by factors such as a relatively low degree of populism and political polarisation, robust public service media, a high amount of shared news content and online users in general, and a high degree of trust in news. Based on these indices, Finland and Denmark fared as the most resilient, whereas Norway and Sweden were in the middle of the list of the countries studied; still, all are part of the most resilient country cluster.

## Challenges of information disorder

Given all the reassuring statistics, it might seem that communication rights are a part of the digital version of the Nordic media welfare state. Even so, as everywhere, digital and especially social media platforms are transforming the Nordic media landscape. The epistemic commons of shared knowledge and culture in these countries is now more easily accessible due to the platforms, but also increasingly fragmented: Platforms enable people to connect and debate, but also polarise official political discourses and challenge traditional advertisement-driven media business models. In addition, the platforms facilitate bad actors with goals of causing personal or societal harm by spreading false and harmful content – and can thus erode citizens' trust in society, all kinds of media, and in one another. While more resilient than many other countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are not immune to societal changes and global crises, such as the infodemic caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the propaganda resulting from the war in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Alone, the prominence of social media platforms in people's lives in the Nordic countries suggests at least some degree of exposure and potential vulnerability to information disorder. As Figure 4.4 illustrates, several social media platforms occupy a significant space in these countries.

**Figure 4.4** Six most popular social media platforms in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2022 (per cent)



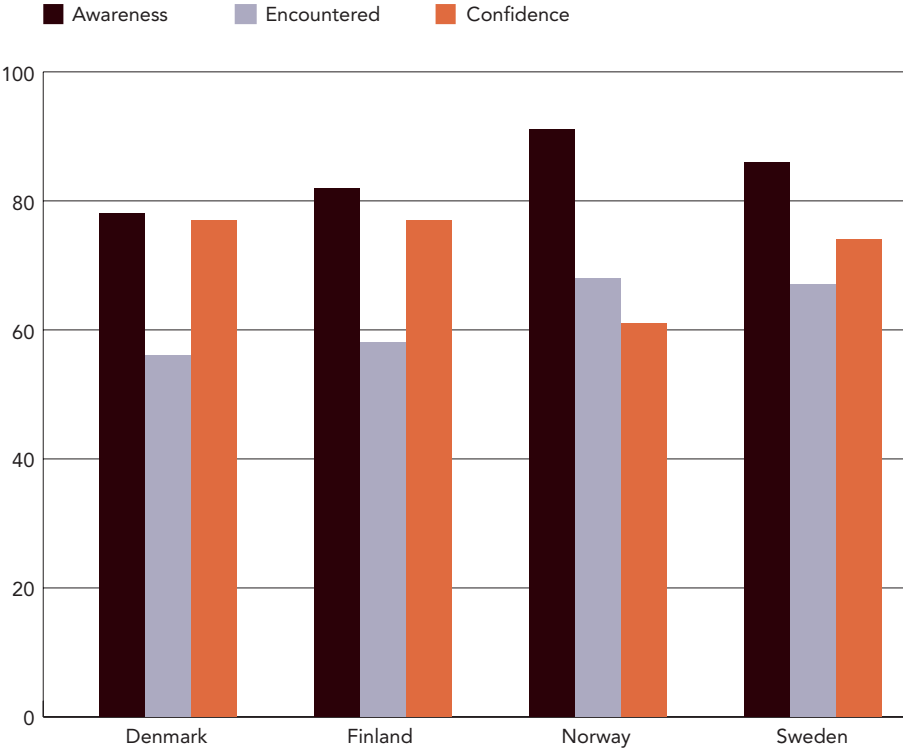
SOURCE: Newman et al., 2022

While Facebook was the most popular social media site in all countries studied in 2022, there were also some differences. Facebook Messenger was popular in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, but not as much in Finland. In contrast, Finns preferred the WhatsApp messenger service as much as Facebook. LinkedIn was among the top-six most used platforms in Denmark, and SnapChat had high penetration in Norway. Furthermore, these platforms are relatively significant news sources, although the prominence of Facebook as a source is clear: In 2022, the social network was used for getting news by approximately one-third of news consumers in each country. News is also shared on these platforms: 15 per cent of people in Denmark, 27 per cent in Sweden, 25 per cent in Norway and 29 per cent in Finland shared news via social media, messaging apps, and e-mail in 2022 (Newman et al., 2022).

Such prominence of social media in people’s everyday lives, even when the platforms are not decidedly used as news sources, exposes audiences to potential harms, even if the tradition of the media welfare state is strong. As mentioned above, and in accordance with global developments, all Nordic

societies face increasing social and political polarisation, which coincides with the expansion of social media. Some studies suggest that Finns encounter disinformation significantly less often than Americans, Brits, or Spaniards and point to high awareness of online disinformation, social media filter bubbles, and the like (Horowitz et al., 2021). The Norwegian findings of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* highlighted that 45 per cent are concerned about false information in online news (Bjørgan & Moe, 2021). Covid-19 leads as a topic of false or misleading content, followed by climate change, or the environment, and politics. Facebook is considered a key source of disinformation. A Eurobarometer survey from 2021–2022 shows that a great majority of Nordic audiences see disinformation as a legitimate problem, that over 50 per cent in the four countries studied have encountered disinformation, but a majority also are confident that they are capable of identifying false information (see Figure 4.5).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 4.5** Awareness of disinformation as a problem, personal experience of disinformation, and confidence in detecting disinformation, 2021 (per cent)



SOURCE: Eurobarometer, 2022

In addition, a survey taken in ten European countries, including Sweden, suggests that disinformation is generally found around various topics and is sourced from politicians, corporations, and foreign actors (Hameleers et al., 2021). This study, as well as one on Finnish audiences (Horowitz et al., 2021), found warning signs in too much scepticism, which can lead to a general distrust of all news. The Finnish study in particular points to audiences' mutual distrust and doubts about others' media literacy skills in navigating the online environment. Some researchers are also concerned about people's tendency to overestimate their ability to detect false information and other fake content online (Kalsnes et al., 2021). Nevertheless, other challenges of literacy include the need to increase engagement with underserved language groups and other communities and to widen the understanding of the media and information needs of adults and older people, from practical digital skills to their ability to detect disinformation (see, e.g., Rivinen et al., 2021).

The most comprehensive comparative account of policy and regulatory media environments to date, the annual Media Pluralism Monitor of the European University Institute, assesses risk scores for the protection of the freedom of the media environment, diversity of the market, political independence, and social inclusiveness – all key aspects of a digital media welfare state and a resilient media and communications system. The in-depth analyses resulting in risk scores point to some challenges in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. For all three countries, ownership concentration demonstrates a risk in terms of the diversity of the market due to the lack of limitations concerning the concentration of ownership (Färdigh, 2022; Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022; Santos Rasmussen et al., 2022). A section of the study on Finland (Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022) points out the growing risk of disinformation and the growing harassment of journalists, which, in worst case scenarios, may result in self-censorship (see also Hiltunen 2021). The Nordic reports also highlight the lack of data supporting evidence-based media policymaking.

Some comprehensive indications of the harms caused by information disorder can be found in the global Digital Society Project (Mechkova et al., 2022). Although the Nordic countries fare very well regarding the lack of domestic or even foreign interference in online communication, all countries showcase at least a moderate degree of polarisation in terms of views and debates in the media publicity. This reflects the wider challenges of societal polarisation that have caused concern regarding the ability of the Nordic digital media welfare state to support communication rights (e.g., Nieminen, 2019).

## **Discussion: Communication rights in support of the epistemic commons in the Nordic digital welfare state**

The empirical overview indicates that the Nordics fare quite well in terms of access, availability, and, to a degree, dialogicality. All the Nordic countries also have robust privacy policies and regulations, and the European Union's

General Data Protection Regulation and the new Digital Services Act add protections for users and opportunities to flag harmful online activity. Even so, although the European policy framework offers strong support for the rights-based approach to disinformation, as well as concrete guidelines for some practices, the overview of information disorder in the Nordics suggests that to follow the ideal of the media welfare state in the digital era, Nordic-specific actions need to take place. From the ubiquity of social media and concentration of the markets, to hateful online speech targeting knowledge workers, and the growing likelihood of foreign interference due to the war in Ukraine, the evidence of threats is mounting: A Nordic digital media welfare state is not a guarantee.

It is clear that the potential of the Nordics to provide epistemic commons that secure citizens' communication rights is dependent on more than media and communications policies. The entire Nordic welfare state manifests contradictory trends. On the one hand, the Nordic countries tend to rank as the most successful societies in almost all areas: gender equality, education, public service media, social security, family policy, healthcare, and pension systems (Martela et al., 2020). On the other hand, despite being the world's most educated and informed people, Nordic societies are suffering from the same malaises as most other European countries: increasing inequality; growing social, political, and cultural polarisation; mounting criminality; racism and anti-immigration movements; and the rise of far-right political parties (Antonucci, 2019; Duina & Merand, 2020; SEPOS, 2019).

The above developments are inherently related to the validity of the Nordic welfare state as a concept. One often-mentioned explanation is that Nordic governments have followed the general European–Atlantic trend of neoliberal policies. As a result, they have given up the core principles on which the welfare state was established: universalism, equality, and solidarity (Greve & Kvist, 2021; University of Helsinki, 2019b). Furthermore, the less-critical voices have listed the challenges faced by the Nordic model, including an aging population, individualisation (declining solidarity), and the environmental crisis. According to critics, the Nordic model, as traditionally understood, will not be able to cover the rapidly increasing costs needed to tackle all these challenges (University of Helsinki, 2019a). From the viewpoint of the media, it will be a paramount task to uphold and defend social welfare values, including citizens' communication rights, when such ideals are not only questioned but potentially even discarded as well.

These developments underline that, while the European Union policy initiatives are significant in battling information disorder, the Nordic context, specifically, warrants serious consideration of communication rights as a policy imperative. As noted by the report of the Think Tank for Tech and Democracy: “We have so much to celebrate and so much to preserve” (Bornakke, 2023: para. 3). The Nordic legacy, the urgent need to address information disorder in these countries, and the unique opportunities within the Nordics

to counter related challenges are effectively recognised by various Nordic stakeholders. For example, interviews with an array of Nordic policymakers, journalists, fact-checkers, and media literacy experts (Horowitz, 2022) highlight that different national actors in the Nordics often lack a common understanding of information disorder, including its roots, manifestations, and possible cures. The countries embody different levels of fact-checking activities, from small-scale activities in some countries, like Sweden, to established actors like those in Norway.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that, although the long history of strong media literacy policies and practices is recognised by all stakeholders, there exists the fear that such a reliance on the discourse of excellent literacy levels is a catch-all solution that overshadows the new educational and emancipatory needs of the digital age. Finally, even the concept of media and information literacy is in flux and understood differently by different actors in the context of information disorder. There are also calls for collaboration in these activities that, to an extent, address similar challenges in many countries. The framework of four communication rights could offer a basic, common scheme for digital information literacy, one that would cover central challenges and capabilities related to each right and aid in creating systematic processes of evaluating literacy activities.

Even more generally, when assessing the state of the Nordic media and its resilience in facing information disorder and platformisation, it is useful to remember that societal resilience is in the end related to institutional trust. Longitudinal studies have shown that even when trust in the government and politicians is low – as has been the case in most European countries in recent years – trust in the political system and democracy has remained stable (see OECD, 2022; Warren, 2017). In a global comparison, the Nordic countries fare very well here. The same concerns people’s trust in media: Although there is pronounced distrust in media in general, the news media – seen as an institutional source of information – tend to receive high trust scores (see Eurobarometer, 2022; Newman et al., 2023), especially in times of crisis when there is an urgent need for topical and reliable information, as in the cases of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to the OECD, the main obstacle in building trust today is inequality and people’s perceived lack of political influence (OECD, 2022). The Nordic welfare state is historically built on the premises of equality, in all its social, political, and cultural dimensions. Although these premises have been tested and questioned in recent decades (Greve & Kvist, 2021), Nordic countries still stand globally as examples of equality and high-trust societies. This could be a remarkable outcome and partly due to the strong legacy of the media welfare state – even in the current climate of polarised politisation and liberalisation of Nordic media policymaking (see Schröder et al., Chapter 1).

All these findings are reflected in the recommendations of the Think Tank for Tech and Democracy that include demanding and implementing demo-



cratic principles for how tech giants influence societies and democracies – in the Nordics, Europe, and globally; protecting the digital well-being of children and youth; promoting democratic online discourse through innovative means; collaborating in media and information literacy efforts; supporting national independent fact-checking; and enabling public service broadcasters to develop new digital content and services to curb information disorder and empower citizens for democratic debate. All these policy and action interventions are, more implicitly or explicitly, features of a digital media welfare state, prerequisites of a Nordic ideal of epistemic commons, and as such, also measures to support communication rights. The recommendations seek to, among other things, support such future visions as “a united [Nordic] tech-democratic region”, with “thriving and digitally literate citizens” who have “access to diverse and credible digital platforms and communities” and participate in “open and informed public debates” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

The above lofty visions are, at the moment, curbed by information disorder. At the same time, they symbolise what the legacy of the media welfare state model could mean for the future. Nordic media have played an elemental part in building Nordic success and will potentially continue to do so. Fully assessing the realisation of communication rights, as well as the potential future challenges of information disorder in the Nordics, requires a more thorough and multi-dimensional empirical outlook than that presented in this chapter. As argued in a study on the Scandinavian context of false news and journalism (Kalsnes et al., 2021), we need more studies about the scale of disinformation in the Nordic region; the different types of disinformation and propaganda in the Nordic countries; peoples’ abilities to distinguish facts, opinions, and fakes; and new methods for digital source criticism and digital information literacy in general. In this chapter, we posit that we need to know more, particularly how Nordic societies protect, and further develop, citizens’ rights in the digital era.

Nevertheless, one finding from the comparisons in this chapter gives particular hope but also demands action by policymakers, the media, and scholars alike: Citizens in the Nordic countries seem to trust that their rights are looked after in their digitalised societies. A Eurobarometer (2021) survey on digital rights and principles revealed that Danes, Finns, and Swedes are the most optimistic in the European Union about their digital future. Their biggest concerns, in the end, are not forms of information disorder as such, but cybercrime and forms of inequality that digitalisation may bring about. These sentiments speak further to the ongoing ethos of Nordic welfare states in the digital era. In the end, we argue that a rights-based approach is not only worth adopting, but a necessity in order to create a true epistemic commons for Nordic digital media welfare states.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While there are no comparative data at present (2023) to show the extent of disinformation circulating in these countries, fact-checkers in Denmark ([www.tjekdet.dk](http://www.tjekdet.dk)), Finland ([www.faktaabaari.fi](http://www.faktaabaari.fi)), Norway ([www.faktisk.no](http://www.faktisk.no)), and Sweden (<http://www.kallkritikbyran.se>) routinely debunk false information.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the Eurobarometer survey was conducted a few months prior to the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the decision of Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. It is not certain that these figures would have changed drastically even in early 2022: There are no strong indicators that national media landscapes changed drastically (see, e.g., Färdigh et al., 2022; Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022).