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# Normative foundations of media welfare: Perspectives from the Nordic countries

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## Abstract

What does media welfare mean from a normative perspective? The notion of media welfare and “the media welfare state” has mainly been used descriptively, to depict the particular way in which the media are organized in the Nordic welfare states. In this article, we explore media welfare from a normative perspective. Our intention is to open up a discussion about the normative and political implications of the notion of media welfare and to bring the concept into the contemporary discussion on normative perspectives regarding the media.

## Keywords

communication rights, media justice, media policy, media welfare, Nordic welfare state, universalism

## Introduction

What does media welfare mean from a normative perspective? This is a question that has not been explored sufficiently. The notion of media welfare and “the media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al., 2014) has mainly been used descriptively, to depict the particular way in which the media are organized in the Nordic welfare states. In this article, we

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explore media welfare from a normative perspective. Our intention is to open up a discussion about the normative and political implications of the notion of media welfare and to bring the concept into the contemporary discussion on normative perspectives regarding the media, alongside concepts such as media justice (Fenton et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Jensen, 2021), democratic media (Carpentier et al., 2014), communication rights (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2007), and the capabilities approach (Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Litschka, 2019). Our exploration of media welfare as a normative concept is not an attempt to supersede these previous approaches, but rather an attempt to suggest a way forward that might supplement or be combined with them. In contrast to previous attempts we ground our starting point in what the philosopher Raymond Geuss has called a “realist” political philosophy. That means starting in the first instance “with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.” (Geuss, 2008: 9). We focus on media welfare in the Nordic countries, and while there are important differences between these countries when it comes to media welfare, we concentrate on the broader similarities within this region.

What we aim to do is to answer the question: what is the normative foundations of the Nordic media welfare state? The approach is hence both empirical and philosophical, and the questions raised in this article about media welfare as a normative concept have, we argue, a wider relevance for normative discussions within media and communication studies and policy. Beyond the regional relevance within the Nordic countries, where the analysis in this article help deepen our understanding of what a “media welfare state” might entail, the article also has a broader relevance to an international audience. This broader significance, we think, has three dimensions. Firstly, the endeavor to clarify the normative foundations of the Nordic media welfare state opens the possibility for, contrasting and comparing media welfare as a normative ideal to other normative frameworks in the study of media and communications. Secondly, our approach opens for comparative work in media systems research, that from a firmer ground can compare the normative basis that underlies different media systems. Lastly, and most importantly, the wider and international relevance of this specific regional case-study, is that it develops and offers an approach (the “realist political philosophy” discussed above) through which media and communication studies more generally can address normative questions. We will return to, and develop, these thoughts in the conclusion.

## **Background, motivation, and approach**

The media welfare state has become a popular concept in comparative media policy research as a name for describing the particular way in which the media are organized in the Nordic welfare states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). The concept was coined in Syvertsen et al.’s (2014) book *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*. The concept introduced in this book appears to hint at something important, considering the many discussions and debates that have followed the book’s publication. According to a literature review from 2020, more than 200 works have cited used the concept of the media welfare state (Enli and Syvertsen, 2020). For example, one discussed topic is the persistence of the media welfare state over time and whether the

media welfare state – as a particular way of organizing the media in the Nordic countries – has survived the digitization, datafication, globalization, and neoliberalization of media systems (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2021). Another question that has been explored is whether the media systems in the “other” Nordic countries and the autonomous regions within the Nordic countries, such as Iceland, Faroe Island and Greenland, can also be described as media welfare states (Willig and Nord, 2021). Both of these questions – that is, the persistence of the media welfare state and the applicability of the concept to different cases – necessitate a clear understanding of what a media welfare state *is*. Without such a definition, no answer to either question can be provided. The definition used most often in these discussions derives from the existing institutions and practices of the media in the Nordic countries. According to this definition, a media welfare state is a media policy paradigm manifested in a well-financed public service institution with extensive media subsidies, a cultural policy that covers the media and so forth (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

We seek to contribute to previous research on the Nordic media welfare state by exploring the concept of media welfare as such. If a media welfare state or society is defined as a state or society that enhances media welfare, then in order to move the discussion forward, it is necessary to clarify and establish a basis for what media welfare is or should be. In short, it is necessary to further explore the normative foundations for media welfare. This exploration will then make it possible to move beyond the tautological or pragmatic definition that currently dominates the discussion, in which institutions and specific policy practices – that is, media subsidies, institutions for freedom of the press, public service media, consensual solutions between relevant stakeholders and so forth – often play a key role in defining media welfare. Naturally, there is no lack of discussions on the normative basis, or what Syvertsen et al. (2014) label the “pillars” of media welfare, in existing research. Concepts such as freedom, universality, diversity and quality, and cooperation are some of the pillars that have been argued to support media welfare (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Nevertheless, these concepts, along with their relevance and complexity, have not yet reached the forefront of the discussion on media welfare. Thus, questions remain – for example, on the relationship between normative foundations, policy measures and institutions within the suggested pillars. The approach to the question of normative foundations taken in this article starts, in a realist vein (Geuss, 2008), from the ideals, norms and values, as well as the institutions and policy measures, of the actually existing Nordic media welfare state – (similarly to Syvertsen et al., 2014) – but with the aim to make clearer distinctions between and to separate the discussion on norms and values on the one hand, and the existing media landscape and its functions and institutions on the other hand.

A more extended discussion on the normative assumptions within the notion of media welfare presents some advantages. First, explicating such normative foundations implies that the idea of media welfare can be judged independently from the existing institutions and current media practices in the Nordic countries. Thus, the question of whether the Nordic countries are media welfare states or not does not need to be dependent on whether the media institutions in these countries behave more or less the same as they did in the past. Furthermore, separating the normative idea of media welfare from the existing institutions that practise it means that the concept can be applied outside of the

Nordic region. It also suggests that the idea of media welfare can be inserted into contemporary discussions on media ethics and media policy – topics that have gained currency in recent years, not least in relation to questions about digital platforms and datafication. Loosening the connection between the concept of media welfare and its current manifestation in existing institutions and practices implies, for example, that it becomes possible to ask questions about *digital* media welfare; for example, how should digital platforms be organized in order to promote the welfare of citizens in datafied societies? Also, a deeper consideration of the normative foundations of media welfare makes it possible to ask questions about the differences and similarities between media welfare and other neighboring concepts such as media justice.

The analysis in this article is laid out as follows. The next section provides a basic introduction to welfare and related concepts and questions – with a focus on *needs* and *rights*, and how they are best provided for – from the perspective of political philosophy. Some of the main differences between different welfare regimes are also presented here. The subsequent section focuses particularly on the Nordic welfare state and the normative foundations of this welfare regime, beginning with a brief historical overview. The discussion then turns to *universalism*, *equality* and *de-commodification* as three political and normative concerns through which the Nordic welfare state can be distinguished from other welfare regimes. The main part of the article then follows, with a focus on the normative foundations of the particular way in which welfare has been understood and practiced in the Nordic countries. We recognize the fact that the Nordic welfare societies have evolved in and through complex political processes, which have entailed compromises and negotiations between different social actors, as well as political mobilization and struggle in relation to concrete experiences of social problems and attempts to solve them. Therefore, the welfare state must be understood as a pragmatic patchwork, rather than a closed philosophical system. The question under discussion is: what are the normative arguments and foundations behind the actually existing Nordic welfare state, and how do they resonate with the way in which media welfare has been institutionalized in the Nordic countries? This part of our argument builds on the work of the Nordic political scientists Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) and Goul Andersen (1999, 2012), who have sought to map and analyze the normative foundations of the Nordic welfare models. Kildal and Kuhnle use Goul Andersen's (1999) compilation of arguments that have been used in favor of the Nordic welfare state at different times and in different contexts. Summarizing these arguments, Kildal and Kuhnle argue that the arguments fall into different categories. Among their categories, those discussed in the present article are *community building*, *risk exposure*, and *human dignity*.<sup>1</sup> These broad categories include normative arguments that encompass needs, rights, and arguments about how these needs and rights are best provided for. In the final part of the analysis, we argue that these normative foundations resonate with how media systems in the Nordic countries have been organized. We thus conclude that there is a shared normative foundation for the social welfare state and the media welfare state.

## Welfare

Welfare relates to the satisfaction of basic *needs*. A welfare state can thus be understood as a mechanism for the satisfaction of basic needs (White, 2010: 20). However, this

statement immediately poses the question of what basic needs are. Discussions on media policy, as well as discussions on welfare policy in general, have commonly turned to the philosophies of economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Helen Nussbaum to answer this question (see e.g. Couldry, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Litschka, 2019; Moss, 2018; Sourbati, 2012). Sen and Nussbaum (1993) famously argued that the question of *needs* is best understood from the perspective of *capabilities*. According to these scholars, a capability is the power to achieve certain “functionings.” In order for individuals to flourish in society, they need access to a certain set of functionings, which are determined by both biological and social factors and are dependent upon the society within which an individual lives. Needs are thus construed as physiological, social, and cultural.

The question of what constitutes a basic need is inherently contested. Nussbaum (2011: 33) has suggested a list of capabilities that she argues are crucial for a “dignified and minimally flourishing life,” which includes capabilities relating to the media, such as those relating to the “senses, imagination, and thought.” Sen, on the other hand, forefronts the need for public deliberation to determine which capabilities are most important. Despite the contestability of the constitution of basic needs, Couldry (2012) provides a provisional list of the “the types of needs that specific media cultures might *distinctively* fulfill” (p. 162), which includes economic, ethnic, political, recognition, belief, social, and leisure needs. The list-based approach to defining basic needs has been criticized, however, on the grounds highlighted by Sen (see above); for instance, it can be argued that lists escape public deliberation and tend to be insufficient and provisional at best and rigid and paternalistic at worst. Moss (2018) argues that a focus on capabilities misses the crucial deliberative and democratic process of justification, which is necessary for establishing a normative foundation for critical media policy scholarship.

Aside from the problem of establishing which capabilities are most important for welfare state regimes, there is a question that must be answered: what moral right do citizens have to expect the state to provide for their basic needs? Are there certain prerequisites that must be met in order for citizens to demand provisions from the state or is everyone automatically entitled to the same provisions? Are the life choices of individuals relevant in regard to whether they can enjoy certain provisions from the state? Furthermore, different welfare state regimes put different weights on questions of equality. Is it enough for the state to provide a certain minimum level of access to capabilities, or is there a requirement for the state to work toward achieving a certain level of equality in access to capabilities? Both of these questions – the conditionality of rights and questions of equality – have historically been handled differently in liberal, conservative and social-democratic welfare regimes (White, 2010).

## Universalism

During the 19th and 20th centuries, extensive social welfare programs were introduced in many countries around the world. However, only some of these countries have been described as welfare states. Different forms of welfare states emerged in these countries, and it is generally accepted that the development of the welfare state in the Nordic countries followed its own trajectory (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The normative idea of welfare is tightly connected to these historical developments.

The first steps toward the Nordic welfare state were taken in the 19th century with the introduction of a compulsory system of elementary education in the Nordic countries. Further reforms were introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the institutionalization of public healthcare and social insurance programs. However, it was not until after the Second World War that a majority of the welfare programs in the Nordic countries were universally provided to all citizens (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2005). The period between the post-war era and the 1970s is generally seen as the high point of the Nordic welfare state. Beginning in the 1970s, the welfare state was challenged on several different fronts, and its survival and adaptability are still a matter of academic debate (Greve, 2018). One of the challenges confronting the welfare state, which has continued to the present day, is the privatization of welfare services. Another challenge is the weakening of the idea of universal welfare and the introduction of ideas about the deservedness of state aid and means testing (Bonoli and Natali, 2012). A third challenge is presented by the rising levels of economic inequality (Therborn, 2020). During the historical development of the welfare state, many different (and sometimes competing) welfare ideals and normative arguments have been put forward in defense of this concept. It is thus impossible to extract from the historical records a single and unified notion of what the responsibilities of the welfare state are and why these particular responsibilities are emphasized. Indeed, as Kuhlmann (2018) argues, the welfare state is a dynamic concept, and its conceptualization has always been the product of particular contexts.

The dynamic nature of the welfare state concept might explain its relative absence from debates about media ethics and normative media theories. Nevertheless, some scholars (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2005) have suggested that – beneath the changing functioning and conceptualizations of the welfare state – there is an identifiable normative foundation of ethical and normative arguments that have been put forward to legitimize the welfare state in its many shapes and variants. This normative foundation serves as a stepping stone for the discussion in this article about possible normative foundations for the media welfare state.

Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) argue that universalism is one of the characteristic principles of welfare reforms in the Nordic countries. Universalism is a recurring idea within various normative frameworks, but it has a certain meaning within discussions on the welfare state within the Nordic countries. Universal welfare refers to the principle that welfare programs should include all members of a community, the borders of which can be decided by, for example, residence or citizenship. The difference between the universalist Nordic welfare model and selective welfare systems, is that the latter are based on certain criteria according to which an individual must qualify in order to be included in a welfare program. By contrast, all members of a community are equally qualified for inclusion in universal welfare programs. In regard to media welfare, Syvertsen et al. (2014: 17) refer to the idea of universal welfare when they argue that the first pillar of the Nordic media welfare state is to ensure the 'organization of vital communication services that underscores their character as *public goods*, with extensive cross-subsidies and obligations toward universality' (italics in the original). This pillar is exemplified by universal access to radio and public service television, which are paid for by citizens, and the commitment of the Nordic states to provide universal access to Internet and broadband



connections. Accordingly, the concept of universalism plays a central role in both existing ideas on the Nordic welfare state and media policy in the Nordic countries.

Aside from universality, the Nordic welfare state has other distinguishing features that are related to universalism – features that are best understood on their own. Esping-Andersen (1990) singles out equality and de-commodification as two such distinguishing features. The emphasis on equality within this model suggests that the state should not only guarantee the fulfilment of basic needs, but also address the inequalities that nevertheless ensue, even after everyone has been guaranteed access to resources and opportunities. When discussing media welfare, Syvertsen et al. (2014) mention equality in relation to the balance between the state and the market in welfare provisions; they maintain that equality requires market provisions to play a supplementary role and that social and economic inequalities should not impact access to cultural and informational goods. Another line of reasoning is that a general welfare system is based on and contributes to de-commodification, since it removes services such as healthcare and education from the market and instead reinstates them as public goods; in that sense, the welfare system also tilts the power balance between capital and labor in favor of the latter. This is one of the specific traits of a social-democratic welfare regime, and one that is also visible to some degree in the media sector. The Scandinavian media markets have long been marked by a dual ownership structure, with a monopoly and public ownership in broadcasting but private ownership of the press. Nevertheless, private actors were (and still are) largely dependent on public media subsidies.

In this section, we have shown that the Nordic welfare state – as well as the Nordic media welfare state – can be characterized by its focus on universality, equality and de-commodification. There is an ongoing discussion about how these distinguishing traits have been weakened over time and how they are not as distinguishing features today as they have been previously (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2021). In the following sections, however, we are not concerned with the current manifestations of the media welfare state. Instead, we focus on the arguments that have been put forward in defense of the particular Nordic media model. Why is there a focus on universality? What are the normative grounds for organizing a welfare state centered on universality? Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) distinguish among different categories of arguments that have been put forward in defense of this idea, which we summarize here as *community building*, *risk exposure*, and *human dignity*. Below, we analyze how these arguments resonate with the way in which the idea of media welfare has been institutionalized in the Nordic media system and how they have served as a foundation for the idea of media welfare. What we offer is not a purely prescriptive normative discussion, nor a purely descriptive statement of facts (Geuss, 2008: 16), but an analysis of the normative ideals that have shaped the Nordic media welfare states. In other words, we set out to identify the starting point that we (like it or not) face when analyzing the future for media welfare.

## Community building

Social cohesion has been an important argument for the universalism of the Nordic welfare states (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2005). Ensuring that all members of society are included in the safety net of welfare provisions constructs a basis for community among the



members of society. The Nordic welfare state has thus provided not only for the material needs of its citizens, but also for their social needs. In terms of capabilities, it can be argued that the welfare state has provided the means for association and cooperation among its members. Divisions based on social class and economic inequalities have been seen as detrimental to social cohesion, and the universal provision of welfare goods and services has been adopted as one way to avoid such divisions. Over time, immigration has emerged as another motivation for the community-building aspects of the welfare state, as the Nordic states have become less homogeneous in terms of the cultural habits and background of their citizens. The welfare state has sought both to facilitate a loose, but general feeling of identification and community between all citizens, while simultaneously, through for example subsidies for civil society organizations, enable various smaller communities and processes of community formation, to exist side-by-side within the realm of the welfare state. The extensive press subsidies in the media welfare state might for example be seen in this light, as support systems for the formation of local communities through the support of local media.

Media and communications play an important part in community building in modern societies. Anderson (1983) famously claimed that the media constitute the basis of *imagined communities* in large-scale and mass-mediated societies. Radio and television intensified the experience of community that was made possible by the press, by adding simultaneity and liveness to the dissemination of information through the printed word (Moe, 2008). More recently, networked digital media have added other possibilities for establishing and maintaining communities (Wellman et al., 2002), although today the divisive and polarizing aspects of these media may be more discussed (Sunstein, 2017). From a media welfare and community perspective, radio and television have historically played the most prominent role; nevertheless, more than any particular media technology, it is the organization of the media in the form of public service media that has been the key component of the media welfare state's provision of a basis for community and solidarity.

For one thing, the community-building aspects of public service media lies in its organization and form; the idea of universal access and complete reach (all citizens must be able to access public service broadcasting) creates in itself an imagined community. "We" are the group that has access to this specific media form. At the same time, this community is open in the sense that it does not put any demands on participation or response on behalf of the members of this community (Peters, 1999).

When it comes to community building through the specific content of the broadcasts, this has often been viewed as an elite project – as an attempt to "create and maintain a national culture by offering a uniform, high culture as a vehicle to 'educate' its citizens to become citizens of the community which the broadcasting service claims to represent" (Van Den Bulck, 2001: 54). Such descriptions, regardless of their empirical validity, which arguably varies from country to country, contain the (sometimes implicit) critique that the construction of community is based on a "postulate of homogeneity" (Van Den Bulck, 2001), which public service media then tries to force into existence, sometimes despite the interests of the audience. This view is often discussed and critiqued as a paternalist rationale for public service media (Donders, 2021). From the perspective of the Nordic media welfare state, this criticism requires consideration, not least in light of

recent attempts to appropriate the idea of the public service media as a means to construct an exclusionary national identity, which have surfaced within the right-wing populist movement in Europe (Klimkiewicz, 2017). If nothing else, this development shows that “community” is an ambiguous concept – and may even be an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 1996) – and that the proponents of media welfare need to fill this concept with positive substance.

In their discussion on the media welfare state, Syvertsen et al. (2014) acknowledge the critique that there is an element of paternalism and nationalism built into the public service institution. Yet, they also argue that public service broadcasting in the Nordic countries has been less paternalistic than, for example, its counterpart in the UK and that it has adapted a popular and egalitarian form of enlightenment thinking. They also argue that it is, in fact, the historical role played by the public service media in the Nordic countries of *representing the nation*, through the genres of news, drama, entertainment and sports, that can explain to some extent the continuing legitimacy and popularity of public service media companies in that region. Nevertheless, we argue that there is more to the idea of public service as a means toward achieving community in the Nordic media welfare state than can be captured by the notion of national identity. Public service media in the media welfare state have also supported cosmopolitan ideas of humanity as a single community (Nussbaum, 1994) and supplied support structures for the construction of more local and/or group-based communities.

The idea of mediated cosmopolitanism may have more critics than adherents (for an overview see Lindell, 2014). It has been argued that the very idea of cosmopolitanism is an elite ideal, disconnected from the experiences of the majority (Calhoun, 2002). It has also been argued that cosmopolitanism is a Western ideal and is thus inherently contradictory (Pieterse, 2006). Furthermore, it has been argued that mediated cosmopolitanism only allows people to take part in other people’s lives through their eyes, rather than through action, and the ways in which the media represent the Other have been criticized (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013). Rather than arguing for cosmopolitanism as an ideal, we argue in this article that the public service media has tried to live up to this ideal as much as possible in the media welfare state. Mediated cosmopolitanism is about the creation of an imagined community that can tackle global risks such as climate change, famine, migration, and war (Beck, 2006). To a greater extent than other media, the media welfare institutions of public service media have taken responsibility for such community building by supplying their audience with international content from a diverse set of genres, ranging from news to drama and sports (Cushion, 2012; Silverstone, 2007).

The nationalist bias of public service media is often criticized by leftist academics and critics, while the cosmopolitan bias is often criticized by right-wing populist and conservative voices. However, there are other sides to the community-building functions of the media welfare state. For example, minority groups and minority languages have been given a place in the public service media in the Nordic countries, which they largely lack in the commercial media system. Not only are public service media expected to cater for the interests of minorities, through for example inclusion and representation, but can also, as shown by Naerland and Dahl (2022) following the capabilities approach, be enabling in some capacities. Although this space has not always been guaranteed (Christensen, 2001), under the best circumstances it means that the public service media

can serve as a platform for community building and identity construction for these groups. Furthermore, the crisis of the newspaper industry and the increasing concentration of media ownership in the Nordic countries, which have been especially damaging for local journalism, have more recently led public service organizations in the Nordic countries to adopt a special responsibility for local news coverage. Although the local and regional news coverage offered by the public service media is mainly complementary to other forms of local media (Nygren, 2019), public service media play a role in the maintenance of local communities.

To summarize, we have argued in this section that community has been an important part of the normative basis of the Nordic welfare state. While it is a contested and, in many ways, problematic concept it has been seen as a basic need, which the media welfare state aims to provide for. The forms of community building that the media welfare state aims to provide for are located on different scales and levels, and have been (and can be) more or less exclusionary or open-ended. From a normative perspective on media welfare, this section poses a number of questions for the future. Is community still an ideal that the media welfare state should strive for, or is this ideal too tied up with paternalist ideas of a homogeneous national identity or middle-class cosmopolitanism? If community is still a value that the media welfare state should strive for, how is this possible within a media landscape where social media platforms are increasingly setting the agenda and where public service media organizations no longer gather the nation in the same way they used to? Finally, does media welfare encompass community building on only one, some, or all of the levels discussed above?

## **Risk exposure**

A second important and underlying argument for universal welfare is what Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) call “risk exposure.” The basic fact that all citizens share the foundational human condition of being subjected to aging and running the risk of illness – and that large groups of the population have a shared risk of unemployment and poverty – creates a need for universal systems of (some degree of) social security. This view is supported by moral arguments regarding our responsibility for fellow humans. But, and perhaps more importantly, the universal welfare system also has pragmatic and practical motivations: for example, other people’s risk of illness and unemployment can produce risks for those who are not directly affected, through mounting social instability or threats to economic development. Furthermore, other people’s risk of illness might increase an individual’s own risk of illness if, for example, infections and deceases are not prevented or contained and the general risk exposure increases. Therefore, universal welfare systems are also motivated by self-interest.

Avoiding the risks associated with media exposure has been an essential part of media policy in the media welfare state throughout the 20th century. Historically, these risks have mainly involved the nature of media content, such as threats to personal integrity and the damage of publicity. The discussion on media policy within the media welfare state has also included other forms of content that have been interpreted as problematic and that expose individuals and society to risks (e.g. pornography, violence, and hate speech), along with a more general debate on the correctness and fairness of media

reporting on social issues. The public and political discourse on media content is often understood as being a conflict between, on the one hand, actors from the mass media, who defend freedom of expression and information, against, on the other hand, repressive impulses from the political field. As shown by Von Krogh (2013), this is a somewhat simplified image. Instead, it would be fair to say that the relationship between the media's and media organizations' interest in a maximal freedom of information and the equally legitimate attempts from political actors to handle risk exposure has been one of negotiation and deliberation, and that the natures of these different interests have not been clear-cut and seldom clearly oppose each other (Von Krogh, 2013). Defending the freedom of information against actors in the media has been a key issue within the political field at times; and at times the interests of politicians and the press have been conjoined. Furthermore, the threat of imposing legislation has generally worked as a motivator for the media to develop functioning systems of self-regulation and ethical codes in order to limit damage to privacy and moderate sensationalist and irresponsible publications, while actual legislation has very seldom been used. In this respect, as argued by Syvertsen et al. (2014), the media welfare state has largely relied on cooperation and trusting relationships between policymakers and the media industry. For example, the Swedish government threatened to pass a law in the 1960s making the right to reply mandatory, which spurred negotiations and pushed the press to develop a self-regulatory framework in order to avoid government interference (Von Krogh, 2013).

A high degree of media and press freedom is in itself a way to manage risk exposure, as such freedom is one way to ensure that the population has access to correct and unbiased information on important societal issues and risks, both individual (e.g. information about vaccines) and societal (e.g. information on technical systems, corruption, crime, or environmental risks). The public service media, which plays a central position in Nordic media policy, is tightly connected to the idea of risk exposure. From the beginning, the public service media's broadcasting monopoly was motivated by the "penetrative power" of audio-visual media and by an ambition to safeguard the population from the possible risks of broadcasting – an ambition that often, and sometimes correctly, is criticized for being paternalistic. The ambitions of the strong Nordic public service organizations are manifested in their broadcasting licenses, which include demands regarding the quality of the programs, in addition to the regulation of problematic content such as violence, pornography and commercial messages. For example, the programming must be innovative, characterized by diversity, reflect conditions throughout society, exhibit pluralism of opinion, and scrutinize and examine those with power in society, among other requirements (Swedish Public Service Television Broadcasting License, Ku2019/02007/MD). This is a concrete way of handling the risks linked to a lack of innovation, homogeneity, misrepresentation and ideological dominance that have been observed in commercialized or liberalized media systems, in addition to other risks that might arise. The special responsibility to provide diverse and high-quality news programming in public service media is also a way of managing other forms of risk exposure, as mentioned above, since a well-informed public has a greater ability to manage both individual and social risks, whereas a poorly informed public might be a risk in itself, on both an individual and societal level.

In recent decades, media welfare policy has generally shifted away from attempts to safeguard the public from the risks of media content and access (e.g. in Sweden, where the broadcasting monopoly and film censorship have both been abandoned). Thus, a higher degree of risk exposure is tolerated, while other mechanisms for handling such risks have been given greater importance. The increasing focus on media and information literacy is an example of this shift, as it is an attempt to give individual citizens the competency or capability to navigate and manage the risks of a media-saturated society on their own. Sweden's Public Authority for Press, Radio and Television has been given an increasing mandate to coordinate efforts on media literacy, and media and information literacy has been given a stronger standing within the school system in Sweden (Forsman, 2020). Here, the longstanding collaboration between the reformist labor movement, the state, and institutions for popular education in regard to media education and educating digital citizens should be mentioned (Rahm, 2019, 2021). This is another concrete example of how the issue of risk exposure is a foundational element for welfarist ambitions in the media sphere.

As discussed in this work, the media welfare state has attempted to handle risk exposure in various ways through systemic solutions. The state and politicians have not directly intervened in these solutions, but have indirectly sought to affect the media (by pushing for self-regulation, broadcasting licensing, etc.). To a far lesser degree, the media welfare state has been concerned with the risks connected to digitalization and digital media – risks that are not predominantly connected to the nature of media content, but rather to the affordances of technological platforms, such as surveillance (Zuboff, 2019), profiling (Elmer, 2004), identity theft (Irshad and Soomro, 2018), and algorithmic discrimination (Crawford, 2021). This is an area that is becoming increasingly acute and in which the media welfare state needs to find relevant answers to contemporary challenges. For the debate within media and communication studies on media welfare and the media welfare state, the discussion above highlights a number of important questions that need to be answered. What are the risks within the contemporary media and communication landscape that need to be included in discussions on media welfare? How far does the responsibility of the media welfare state extend in diminishing the risks associated with datafication, platformization, artificial intelligence, and algorithms? What level of risk can be accepted from a media welfare perspective?

## **Human dignity**

A final category of arguments for the universal welfare state, as defined by Kildal and Kuhnle (2005), is human dignity. Welfare services in themselves, such as healthcare or free education, arguably contribute to human dignity. Furthermore, their universality can be motivated by the fact that conditional welfare systems (which are common in other parts of the world) create the necessity for the individual to perform as being deserving in order to qualify for welfare services, which might impair that individual's sense of dignity and self-respect. Conditioned welfare also increases the risk of stigmatizing certain groups or individuals and designating them as burdens on society. In the media welfare state, a parallel can be found in the consistent construction of a broad public service media system. The idea is that high-quality, non-commercial content and

balanced news reporting, among other things, should not just be a luxury or concern for the happy few. Rather, they should be a basic right for the general population and should be provided via public service media with content of a broad nature, which is intended to make said media relevant for all groups in society. In a similar parallel, strong press subsidies are aimed at securing the existence of high-quality news reporting in all parts of the country, not only in the stronger markets or in regions with a more affluent population.

The responsibility of the state to ensure its citizens' access to means of communication and to bridge communication and information divides can also be understood from the perspective of human dignity. The strong coupling between media and communications policy and cultural policy (e.g. between public support for film production and the public service institutions) is furthermore a way to cater to cultural needs and cultural education through the media. A media welfare state can be motivated not only by the closure of informational gaps and universal contribution to a connected and more well-informed public, but also by the aim of allowing its citizens to explore and develop their cultural orientation and taste.

In this context, it is important to note the difference between protection from the risks associated with poverty and precarity (discussed above) and the appeal to human dignity that is discussed here. An aspect of the normative reasoning behind the Nordic welfare state, which is not always well understood, is its emphasis on individual freedom and the belief that freedom is a fundamental requirement for human dignity. This is what historian Trägårdh (2014) refers to as statist individualism, which is the idea that personal freedom requires the fulfilment of basic needs and access to certain resources, and that the role of the state in this system is to provide a platform that helps individuals to realize their own goals and ambitions. A strong state hence lifts certain social obligations off the individual (e.g. caring for aging parents), thereby freeing the individual to pursue personal development and individual fulfilment, while simultaneously providing resources for such development of human dignity. Although critics of the welfare state are right in pointing out its problematic paternalism, the strong state can hence be associated with a positive notion of freedom, which (from a media welfare state perspective) is based on the idea that freedom can best be achieved by individuals who have access to at least a minimum of information, communication skills, and resources.

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are thus important parts of the Nordic media model, both today and historically (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In international surveys, the Nordic welfare states tend to emerge as the countries with the highest degree of freedom of the press. Freedom, within this framework, is not only about liberating citizens from state power, but also – as traditionally formulated in welfare cultural policy – about liberating the individual from commodification and the forces of the market. Enabling a strong public service media in the Nordic countries is a way of withdrawing key areas of the media from the control of the market. In this sense, the media welfare state is a way of promoting human dignity through individual empowerment and emancipation in relation to structural forces and the power of both state and commerce.

This section discussed how the universal welfare state has historically been motivated by its contribution to human dignity, which we have connected to welfarist ambitions to enable personal freedom. Media development and political developments in recent years



beg the question of how new challenges to freedom and human dignity can be handled and met by media welfare state solutions. In many countries, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are threatened by right-wing populist political movements (Holtz-Bacha, 2021) that seek increased control over the media and communication environment. New media technologies also pose a threat to personal freedom, as they give both states and corporations the means to track people's media practices and secretly guide their media use (Zuboff, 2019). Despite attempts at bridging communication and information divides, increased and deepened polarization is occurring in patterns of media use. Empirical and normative discussions about media welfare should thus incorporate these concerns and analyze how the structural forces of the state and the market manifest themselves in digital networks and how individual freedom and human dignity can be achieved in this environment.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have provided a new conceptualization of media welfare through an analysis of how the normative foundations of the Nordic welfare state – summarized as community building, risk exposure, and human dignity – resonate with how the idea of media welfare has been institutionalized in the Nordic media system. We have argued that such a conceptualization is needed in a time when the Nordic media welfare state is confronted by challenges on many different fronts (Jakobsson et al., 2021). Digitization, platformization, and datafication present challenges to the media welfare state that are new in relation to the needs the original institutions of the media welfare state were meant to provide for. The very idea of media is now different, in comparison with the mass media landscape that was dominant during the period when the media welfare state was originally conceived. In order to defend the relevance of media welfare programs, for example against challenges posed by neoliberal and populist authoritarian media policy, it is thus insufficient to defend the existing institutions and to hinge a definition of media welfare upon institutions created decades – if not centuries – ago. There is a need to think a new on what the media welfare state should provide for its citizens. Although principles and institutions are intertwined, and even mutually constitutive, it is at this moment necessary to focus on and formulate the principles behind the media welfare. In other words, it is by reference to its principles, rather than its existing institutions, that the notion of media welfare can be made relevant in today's media landscape.

Given these needs, the contribution of this article is that it poses questions on what media welfare might mean today, rather than to provide clear-cut answers to concrete media policy issues. We have suggested three principles for media welfare: community building, risk exposure, and human dignity. These are claims that have historically been made and put into practice in the construction of the Nordic welfare states. However, it is an open question what these normative claims mean in today's media and political landscape. Here, we have analyzed normative concepts and arguments regarding media welfare, in the light of the political and institutional histories of the Nordic media welfare state. It is our hope that this can provide some value for thinking about how the idea of media welfare can be extended into the future.



We have approached these normative questions in a way that to some might seem unusual. Rather than formulating principles and translating them into policy suggestions we have tried to distil what media welfare is by recognizing that politics, institutions, norms and values are inextricably intertwined. This means that we have treated the distinction between “ought” and “is” in a relative way, applying it where it is useful for the discussion at hand (Geuss, 2008: 17). Although we think that principled discussions about media ethics and normative frameworks have its place in media studies, we also believe that the realist approach taken here has clear advantages. Idealist approaches to media ethics sometimes proceed as though normative questions can be settled by choosing and combining arguments, concepts, and frameworks from different traditions and political contexts, to real-world problems. The realist approach to norms and values taken here is better positioned, we think, to contribute both to comparative research on media politics and media systems, and to make contributions to ethical and policy debates outside the seminar room.

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### Note

1. Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) include *efficiency* as a fourth category. In order to save space, we chose to include arguments based on efficiency when discussing the three other categories, instead of treating efficiency as a separate category.

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