Book review

Skogerbø, E., Ihlen, Ø., Nørgaard Kristensen, N., & Nord, L. (eds.) (2021). *Power, communication, and politics in the Nordic countries*. Gothenburg: Nordicom. 396 pp.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0055>

This extensive edited volume on politics and media in the Nordic region sets out to establish if there really is a Nordic model for political communication. The book brings more than 40 scholars together to shed light on media and politics in what is internationally known as the *Nordic models*. This refers to the similarities of the Nordic countries, characterized by, among several things, a combination of capitalist economies and historically large welfare systems and public sectors, specific labor market policies including high levels of union membership, a high level of engagement and trust among the citizenry including large voter turnouts, stable political systems, and large public-service media organizations.

The contributors to this volume were selected strategically by the editors, ensuing a mix of scholars with backgrounds in political communication research and media and journalism studies from all the five Nordic countries. The book is divided into two parts. The first part presents the rationale for the volume as a whole, followed by five chapters outlining “media and politics” in the five Nordic countries separately. The second part is thematic and features twelve chapters covering a wide selection of topics that connect to the main theme of “media and politics” in the Nordic region, and a concluding chapter by the editors.

In the first part of the book, the introduction provides an interesting historical and theoretical framework for the volume and emphasizes its relation to previous contributions on media and politics in the Nordic countries, including an overview of recent trends. The editors discuss the relevance of established theoretical perspectives on the Nordic models with regard to media and politics, such as “the media welfare state model” and the “democratic corporatist media systems model” and situate the volume in relation to these internationally known perspectives. In particular, they ask whether these models continue to hold validity in light of recent structural developments in the region. Since the Nordic countries have undergone vast changes with regard to economy, politics, public policies, technology, and overall social conditions, whether there is a divergent trend for the five nations is presented as an open question which is worth detailed scrutiny here.

The five opening chapters cover media and politics in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The focus is set on developments in the electorate and election results, media policies and regulations, media and communications markets, and how political journalism and political communication have progressed over the past decades. The chapters also include sections that explain the development of research perspectives, questions and foci in the five countries, illuminating historical differences and similarities. They also show that there is a high level of convergence over the past decades as a result of an increasingly international research environment, which includes collaboration between researchers, institutions and funding councils in the Nordic region.

In the second part of the book, the twelve thematic chapters display an inclusive definition of political communication. The chapters address various themes such as political journalism (including local journalism), cultural journalism, indigenous political communication, elections, populism, right-wing alternative media, fake news and disinformation, lobbying, public bureaucracies, political media effects, and political rhetoric. All themed chapters adopt comparative perspectives, including analyses of at least two (but often more) Nordic countries. The comparative approach of the chapters is a real strength of this volume, since it opens up fruitful comparisons, illuminating both similarities and differences between the Nordic countries, and it consequently problematizes the somewhat simplified models that situated relatively diverse societies together within umbrella terms such as “the media welfare state model” or “the democratic corporatist media system”. The chapters also point to vast transformations in the Nordic countries, problematizing the notion of unified and stable systems of politics and media. These transformations indicate that the “exceptionalism” of the Nordic models hold less validity today, as they point to global “megatrends” affecting the Nordic countries, such as a much less predictable and stable electorate. However, as the editors conclude in the final chapter, there is still much that signifies the particularity of the Nordic countries in relation to larger, and especially two-party styled, political systems. They are still characterized by a relatively vivid public sphere that includes political actors’ accountability to the public, a relatively autonomous and heterogeneous legacy media, consensual political/electoral systems, and public support for the welfare state system and its democratic practices.

Overall, this is a very timely and well-balanced book, with a strong comparative approach. However, some issues could be noted. The book’s inclusive definition of political communication has both advantages and disadvantages. It moves beyond politics and media relations at the institutional level and covers topics and phenomena that are less commonly approached within conventional political communication research, which is clearly a strength. It shows that polit-

ical communication research can include topics such as highly politicized alternative media, fake news, indigenous media and politics, topics perhaps more associated with other subdisciplines. Yet, the inclusive definition also means that the second part becomes a bit scattered and the connection between some of the chapters is quite vague. However, this is relatively common in extensive edited volumes that seek to cover much ground.

A more general reflection that came to me while assessing the volume is the development of key concepts guiding research on politics and media in the Nordic countries. For example, the concept of mediatization, and particularly the *mediatization of politics* – originating from Nordic scholars and guiding much research on politics and media in the Nordic region in the past – is now so established that it is almost a taken-for-granted term in this volume. The concept of mediatization signified an emerging process that commenced in the 20th century that today underpins almost all politics–media relations and actors – not only in the Nordic countries. Two other key concepts that are visible across the volume – particularly when analyzing recent trends and developments in politics and media – are hybridity and professionalism. These seem to point to converging trends across the countries, characterized by high levels of digitalization in all sectors of society, fragmentation and indeed divergent trends of and within the media systems and a rapid adoptability to technological implementation and change. However, they also point to other trajectories characterizing the development of the Nordic countries, such as increased commercialization and marketization of politics and media, which leads me to a final critical remark of the volume as a whole. The themed section would have benefitted from a chapter critically covering the political economy that underpins much of the recent and accelerating developments in political communication. Now some of the questions and concerns related to capital are addressed in a few of the themed chapters, for example, illustrated in interesting ways in the section “[n]ew political actors on the media scene” in chapter seven on political journalism. Nonetheless, since market-oriented processes – including the commercialization (and indeed professionalization) of communication strategies by political actors, and the huge efforts by capital to influence political processes – have profoundly transformed the welfare models, the volume could have easily devoted a particular chapter covering this. With that said, this volume is a must-read for anybody interested in media and politics in the Nordic region but also for those seeking research on the wider trajectories visible in politics–media relations globally.