

## Chapter 14

# Why free news matters for social inequality

## *Comparing willingness to pay for news in the Nordic region*

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This chapter discusses inequality from the perspective of media use. It analyses patterns of news consumption and willingness to pay for news in three comparatively well-off countries – the small Nordic welfare states of Finland, Denmark and Norway. The chapter reveals significant dissimilarities between these case countries, which we need to understand in relation to the countries' wider media systems as well as historically. By zooming in on news consumption in Denmark, Finland and Norway, we also gain a better understanding of how subtle inequalities play out within these societies. News that is free to users matters as a resource for the citizenship of specific social groups. The implication is that regulatory schemes need to be developed that facilitate quality news provision through channels that are free at the point of use.

To function as citizens in a democracy, we need access to information about public issues, and we need to gain insights into the running of society and its political institutions. News media are seen as a key source that serves this function. If the access to and use of news are unevenly distributed, they can foster social inequality. This is the basic reasoning behind the long-standing research interest in media's effects on the distribution of knowledge (see McQuail, this volume, chapter 2), most recently thematized through the term digital divide. Research on and debates about the digital divide often focus on cases with great imbalance. Prime examples are the polarization in US political communication and the differences between wealthy and poor countries concerning access and literacy (see also Vartanova & Gladkova, this volume, chapter 12). Nonetheless, it is also helpful to pay attention to another kind of cases to understand how inequality plays out in a digital media system, a setting in which the social, political and economic divides appear to be less dramatic. What does inequality in the media look like if we compare similar cases?

This chapter aims to contribute to our understanding of inequality in the media through an analysis of conditions in societies that are alike and performing quite well in terms of informational gaps. I approach the issue from the perspective of media use, utilizing comparative, up-to-date empirical data on news consumption and focusing

on patterns of paying for news. As news consumption moves from print to digital, a key question raised by the media business is whether or not consumers are willing to pay for journalism online. With an interest in informational divides, the question is how different social groups gain access to news as print newspaper distribution declines and journalism is hidden behind paywalls on the web.

The case countries are Denmark, Finland and Norway, commonly labelled by political scientists as representatives of a shared Nordic welfare state model. These countries are also frequently lumped together in comparisons of media systems and tend to be highlighted either as individual representatives of “the Nordics” or as shorthand for a group of countries when scholars, politicians and practitioners need an example of states with relatively well-functioning public interest media. That being said, tendencies observed internationally – of populist politics on the rise, increasing social divisions and a journalistic business in crisis – have also left their mark on these countries. Exactly how practices of news consumption are affected in such turbulent times is a question that remains largely unanswered, and a comparative perspective should yield a better understanding.

The analysis is based on survey data from 2016-2018 and will shed light on two aspects. The first concerns differences between similar countries. I will argue that a closer examination of news consumption data reveals significant dissimilarities between these case countries, which need to be understood in relation to the countries’ wider media systems as well as historically. Second, more importantly, focusing on news consumption in Denmark, Finland and Norway can provide a better understanding of how subtle inequalities play out within contexts with high ICT penetration, stable news provision and relatively egalitarian social structures. The argument that I will make, then, is that (1) we should be aware of the shortcuts that we make when we group together cases in comparative media system analyses, especially when dealing with ongoing, fast-changing developments, and (2) inequalities in the media matters, even under conditions that are comparatively favourable. By analysing how willingness to pay for news off- and online is unevenly distributed among different social groups, I will argue that news that is free to users – whether in the form of ad or public funding – matters as a resource for the citizenship of specific social groups. The implication is that regulatory schemes need to be developed that facilitate quality news provision through channels that are free at the point of use. As such, this chapter zooms in on one of the policy goals addressed by McQuail in his chapter, namely that of “more equal access as audiences to diverse sources and forms of provision” (McQuail, 2019: 39).

In the following, I first review the literature on media system comparisons, as that work has developed over the last decade. I place the Nordic countries within that debate, describe the basics of the three case countries, Denmark, Finland and Norway, and substantiate the choice of comparing these cases in relation to the present issue. Next, I present the data used: comparative survey data from 2016, 2017 and 2018 stemming from the Reuters Institute’s *Digital news report*. On this basis, I discuss inequalities and seek to understand them in the context of recent developments.

## Comparing similar media systems to understand inequalities

The last decade has seen an upsurge in the interest among media and communication scholars in comparisons of media systems and their relations to politics and the state.<sup>1</sup> Much of the interest can be traced to the book *Comparing media systems – Three models of media and politics* published by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini in 2004. Building on an impressive patchwork of studies from a range of countries and languages over a significant period of time, Hallin and Mancini distinguish between: (a) the North Atlantic or liberal model, (b) the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model and (c) the North/Central European democratic corporatist model. The latter includes the Nordic countries (excluding Iceland), Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 11, 89ff.). These countries' media systems are, according to Hallin and Mancini, characterized by early development of the press, a shift away from political pluralism towards neutral commercial press, strong institutionalized professionalism and strong state intervention.

The typology launched by Hallin and Mancini stimulated two types of responses. On the one hand, there were studies that aimed to apply the model and extend it through empirical studies of new areas. On the other hand, there were contributions that criticized the overall project and proposed a different way forward.

The first category contains projects with a clear empirical ambition to extend the foundations laid by Hallin and Mancini. The contributions include an edited volume taking the eastern and southern models (Hallin & Mancini, 2012) and the work of scholars such as Jonathan Hardy (2008) and Katrin Voltmer (2008), proposing alternative interpretations. Within specific subfields, especially political communication, the model is used as a starting point for discussing intraregional differences (e.g. Strömbäck et al. (2008) on political communication in the Nordic region). Such contributions have added to our empirical understanding of the relations between political systems and media systems across regions of the world and updated our knowledge base.

The second category of responses comprises those that are explicitly critical of Hallin and Mancini's efforts. A range of issues has been brought up, and specific labels and categories have been disputed, including the temporal dimension of Hallin and Mancini's model (Hardy, 2012). The roles of certain institutions, such as religious ones, have been identified as missing from the original model (Couldry, 2007). According to Hallin, digital media and the internet are "a big hole" in the book (in Moe & Sjøvaag, 2009: 137). This has consequences especially for the discussions of current tendencies in media systems, such as their potential convergence, which has been duly noted (e.g. Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Hallin and Mancini's focus on traditional news media, predominantly the printed press, led to criticism. From a media system perspective, the model builds predominantly on factors relevant to journalism, whereas the role of cinema and television, the book industry or ICT use receive little attention. From a political

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1. This section builds on parts of the research by Syvertsen and colleagues (2014, 2015).

system perspective, the analysis emphasizes factors directly related to media governance, particularly traditional news media. As a result, aspects describing the political system and the role of the state in more general terms or pertaining to the media in a more indirect way are overlooked. Factors that are more commonly found in, for instance, communication histories or works by political scientists could have produced a different outcome (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

The last point is important in light of another, more fundamental critique. Some (e.g. Hardy, 2008) have argued that Hallin and Mancini show a relative disregard of factors that could differentiate systems. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, this critique – which could be directed to the field of comparative media studies in general – concerns a lack of historical empirical nuances. In one contribution, Peter Humphreys (2012) argues that, “rather than expend time and energy on producing neat typologies, it is much more important to explore in depth a more comprehensive range of salient political, legal and economic variables that bear on the media system” (Humphreys, 2012: 172). If we do the latter, Humphreys continues, we will find path dependency. Here, path dependency means that historically grounded national institutional differences would explain the continued national differences. As a result, one should expect earlier policy choices to have a determining influence on later ones. The call is, basically, for more in-depth and limited comparisons with historical attention to enrich our pool of knowledge, which in turn might be used for modelling.

Such a critique could be dismissed as banal, as it tends to be based on the individual’s perspective: when we try to understand aspects of media systems, we do so with better knowledge of a certain system than others, grounded in our own professional and personal experiences. An attempt at describing a phenomenon from the outside triggers the urge for an insider to correct misconceptions or expand on details. Sure enough, while Humphreys (2012) schools Hallin and Mancini in specificities of German and UK media – in which he is an expert – he simultaneously lumps together a few other countries as “Scandinavia”. For someone with expert knowledge of any one Scandinavian country, a similar reaction is triggered.

From a Danish, Finnish or Norwegian perspective, it seems clear that Hallin and Mancini base their description of the relations between the media systems and the political systems in the Nordic countries on an (historical) analysis that seems to be heavily biased towards Sweden. The approach that I have opted for here can be seen partly to answer the call by Humphreys, but my aim is not to undertake historical single-case analyses. Rather, I want to discuss the current differences between cases and seek to understand these differences with the aid of historical insights and wider knowledge of the political and social contexts. Specifically, I aim to thicken the description and update our understanding of the Nordic region by focusing on one aspect of media use (news consumption) in one period (around 2016-2018) in three countries (Denmark, Finland and Norway). As such, my approach is a small-N, most similar countries design (Lijphart, 1975).

The argument for focusing on the Nordic region is its relatively good conditions for journalism and small digital divides (e.g. Curran et al., 2009). The reason for selecting three of the five Nordic countries (excluding Iceland and Sweden) is threefold. The first is pragmatic and concerns space limitations and the opportunities to dig into specificities. The second is a reaction to the perceived focus on Sweden in the previous debates comparing media systems. The third reason concerns size; Sweden has roughly double the number of inhabitants and Iceland less than a tenth of the inhabitants of Norway, Denmark and Finland (all between 5 and 6 million). The aim of this design is, on a basic level, to highlight aspects of existing patterns of news consumption that – through comparison with similar cases – stand out as potentially problematic. It is hard to say, exactly, how much inequality of different kinds is too much or more than expected. A comparative analysis, with similar cases, facilitates a reasoned assessment of the findings.

On this level of analysis, the aim is to add nuance, which in turn helps us to understand the conditions within the case countries, including inequalities in media use. I do not want to argue that willingness to pay for news (or media systems more generally) ought to be similar across borders and political systems. My argument is, however, normative in the sense that, by invoking “inequality” to describe difference, I signal a want of equality. This should not be understood as an expectation or goal of identical news use (everyone paying for and reading the same sources for the same amount of time, etc.). What I do hold as an ideal is equal rights to access relevant societal information, make use of journalism and more generally connect to the public. Media consumption and usage represent one indicator of how such rights work in practice (Nieminen, this volume, ch. 3). As Abbott (2015) has argued, “inequality” in this sense is perhaps better understood as “injustice”. The motivation for comparing patterns of news consumption and willingness to pay for news within three well-off countries is that it helps to bring out exactly how unevenness can lead to unjust conditions for citizens.

## Media systems and news use in Denmark, Finland and Norway

If earlier contributions to describing the media systems of countries in the Nordic region can be criticized for overlooking nuanced differences, how can they be described better? In a recent book, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) propose a Nordic perspective. The idea is neither to deny that traditional, nationally distinct media and regulatory models have been under massive pressure from globalizing forces over the last decades nor to downplay the variations between Nordic countries. Rather, the book takes as a starting point the fact that the Nordic media and communication systems are distinct to the extent that they stand out in the world (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 2). On that basis, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) argue that the organization of the media systems in the Nordic region builds on four principles, which are changing but remain in place:

1. An organization of vital communication services that underscores their character as *public goods*, with extensive cross-subsidies and obligations toward universality.
2. A range of measures used to institutionalize *freedom from editorial interference* and self-governance in day-to-day operations.
3. A *cultural policy that extends to the media* in the form of content obligations and support schemes that aim to secure diversity and quality.
4. A preference for consensual solutions that are durable and involve *cooperation between main stakeholders*: the state, communication industries and the public. (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 17)

To substantiate this approach, one can dig into the history of certain parts of the media, for example the press, and argue that the press in all the Nordic countries can be characterized by a “well-respected freedom of the press, an established self-regulatory regime, state support for a private commercial press, and a resulting diverse structure with universal appeal and high levels of consumption” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 69-70). Furthermore, on the issue of media use, one can argue that the postwar period brought a distinct norm to the region, where the media were seen as “a vehicle for information and culture and less as a vehicle for entertainment than in many other countries and regions” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 44). The resulting media use patterns featured egalitarianism and commonality – mirroring the ideals of universality and equal access to services of high quality, deemed central to the Nordic welfare states, which in general terms has “emphasized reducing social inequalities” (Kvist & Fritzell, 2012: 10).

One can also delve into history to bring out nuances to such an argument (see Syvertsen et al., 2015). Differences are also quite easy to spot today: local and regional newspapers, for instance, continue to play a significant role in the media markets of Finland and Norway, as opposed to Denmark. However, the influx of so-called freesheets – gratis print newspapers – from the mid-1990s, which happened across the region, spared Norway (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Differences do not, however, just arise when comparing countries. Despite the overall description of egalitarianism and well-functioning welfare state policies, social inequality also exists within the case countries (see Kvist & Fritzell, 2012 for a comprehensive volume). Media use patterns mirror such inequality. Surveys of news consumption typically find significant but, comparatively speaking, small differences between groups of users (e.g. Bruhn Jensen & Helles (2015) on Denmark; Moe & Kleiven (2016) on Norway; Ohlsson and colleagues (2017) on Sweden). Sociologists have also paid attention to how distinct cultural practices and media use play out in these societies. They argue that omnivorism is a key trait (e.g. Gripsrud et al. (2011) on Norway; Harrits and colleagues (2009) on Denmark; Purhonen and colleagues (2010) on Finland), with the educational level playing a key role.

This warrants a comparison of news use. Paying for news is at the core of the challenge of inequality for the following reason: in the transformation from print

to digital, after a decade or so with free access for all, the problem of inducing users to pay for the news that they consume is high on the agenda of the media sector as well as that of politicians (e.g. Kvalheim, 2013; Pickard & Williams, 2014). One key strategy has been to charge money for “exclusive” or “premium” content or journalism deemed to be of high quality, such as investigative stories, and simultaneously to give away news agency stories and quicker, shorter articles for free (e.g. Carson, 2015). At the same time, media policy schemes to support journalism, stemming from the analogue era, have focused on for-pay news, for example by counting sales as a basis for support or through VAT exemptions. This could yield a tendency for quality differences between journalism that is free at the point of use and journalism that is not. As such, it potentially creates information inequality with relevance to just citizenship conditions, that is, if the patterns of users who are willing to pay for news are systematically skewed.

## Method and data: Comparative statistics on news consumption and practices

The analysis is based on data from the survey behind the *Digital news report*.

Commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, with national partners across Europe, the survey is conducted by Yougov with an online questionnaire at the start of each consecutive year (see Newman et al. (2017) for the most recent international report). The case countries are included along with roughly 30 other countries in Europe and worldwide.

The data used here stem from the 2016, 2017 and 2018 surveys.<sup>2</sup> The samples are based on self-recruited panels. One advantage of using panels is the high motivation levels among the respondents. One disadvantage is that the samples are prone to biases, basically since certain types of people are more likely to volunteer for inclusion and longevity in such panels – as could be said of all kinds of survey research. However, the tests conducted by Strabac and Aalberg (2011) show only marginal differences between the answers given by telephone respondents and those given by web panel participants on issues of news knowledge and related questions.

Importantly, the samples in the Reuters data sets only reflect the population in each country that has access to the internet. For many of the countries in the general study, this is a major problem. For the three case countries selected here, however, it is less of a problem due to the very high levels of internet penetration: Reuters Institute’s comparable data indicate that the numbers for this aspect are 96 per cent for Denmark and Norway and 92 per cent for Finland. The data have been weighted.

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2. 2016: Denmark: N = 2041, Finland: N = 2007, Norway: N = 2019. 2017: Denmark: N = 2011, Finland: N = 2007, Norway: N = 2056. 2018: Denmark: N = 2025, Finland: N = 2012, Norway: N = 2027. All the data sets have distribution across gender, age and geography as well as household income and so on. For more details, see <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>.



Any respondents who stated that they had not consumed any news in the past month were filtered out of the data sets. The survey included questions on news habits, brand preferences, media platform use, mobility in news use, interest in different kinds of news, attitudes towards paying for news, attitudes towards advertisements and trust in news as well as background questions on basic demographic variables. As tends to be the case with large-scale surveys conducted across many countries and over several years, some questions are repeated each year, while others are not. I will identify the year(s) from which the data stem for each of the reported findings.

In the following, I use descriptive statistics to compare the cases using a range of relevant variables. I also include segmentation values based on several variables to address the question of inequalities within the individual countries. When analysing inequality within the case countries, I focus on self-reported educational levels.

### Analysis: Interest in, use of and willingness to pay for news

Before I zoom in on the patterns of payment for news and consider where the three case countries differ, it is worth underlining their similarities on two levels.<sup>3</sup> First, in general, when comparing the Nordic countries with countries that have radically different social, political and economic conditions, they seem alike. For instance, looking at how many respondents stated that they sometimes avoid the news, the case countries all score low (2-4 per cent said “often”),<sup>4</sup> while the numbers are much higher in countries such as Mexico (12%), Greece (15%) and Turkey (18%). This draws attention to the egalitarian traits in media use in the case countries.

Considering the use of so-called digital-born news brands, in all the case countries, under 50 per cent of the respondents reported using such brands for news in the last week. For countries further south and east, the corresponding numbers are higher than 70 per cent (e.g. Greece: 88%). From the perspective of a comparison of all countries, then, the data underline and substantiate the basic proposal that the Nordic countries together stand out globally.

Second, the similarities are also worth stressing on another level: for a range of variables, when focusing on just these three cases, they appear to be quite similar. Calculating the number of news sources used by the respondents shows very similar patterns (with statistically significant variation only between Finland and Denmark at each end of the scale; those who use merely one source and those who use more than seven sources). Another illustration would be the centrality of smartphones for news consumption: 39 per cent of Norwegians, 34 per cent of Finnish people and 40 per cent of Danes stated that the smartphone is their main way to obtain news. The point here is to say that not only do the three countries appear to be similar when compared

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3. All the percentages in the following three paragraphs refer to 2017.

4. The reasons given for avoiding the news, however, differ, for example with Finnish respondents stating more often that “I don’t feel there is anything I can do about it” (36% vs. Norwegians with 28% and Danish people with 26%).



with very different cases but also they appear to be similar even when focusing on just Denmark, Finland and Norway. The same applies to the news consumption in general: all the three countries show quite egalitarian patterns of use for many variables, as expected.

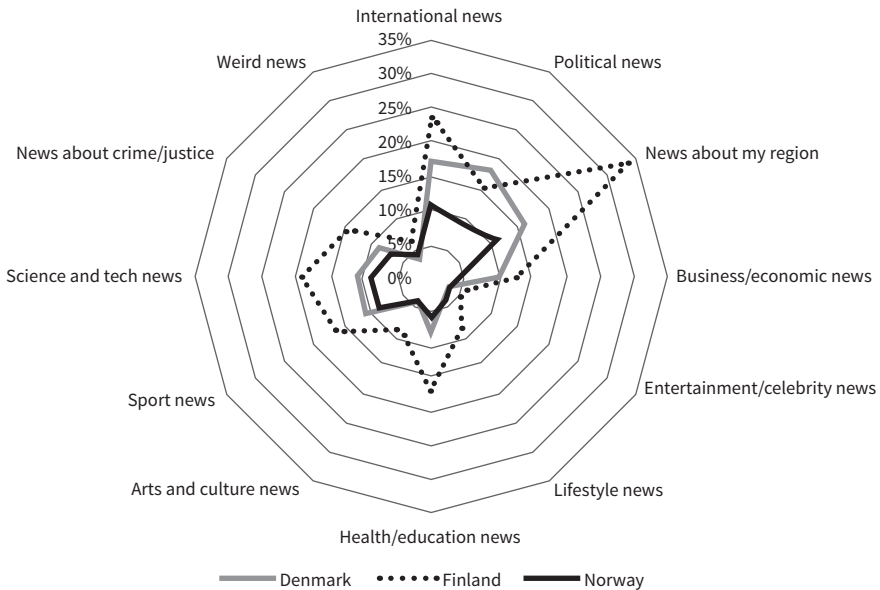
Turning now to where the data display disparities between the countries and highlight inequalities within them, the object is to bring out the differences and highlight the patterns of skewed distribution between social groups – not to argue that the countries are deeply different across our data or that citizens within each of the three countries experience globally unfair conditions.

In the following, I first compare the interest in different forms of news and the segmentation of types of news use in the three case countries. This prepares the ground for an analysis of distribution between groups within each country on the issue of willingness to pay for news.

*Interest in and use of news*

While I have already mentioned the low numbers of respondents claiming to avoid the news, the question remains of how much interest people have in news in general as well as in specific kinds of news and how these interests are translated into practices of consumption.

**Figure 1.** Interest in different kinds of news: Percentage stating “extreme interest” in each type, across case countries, 2017

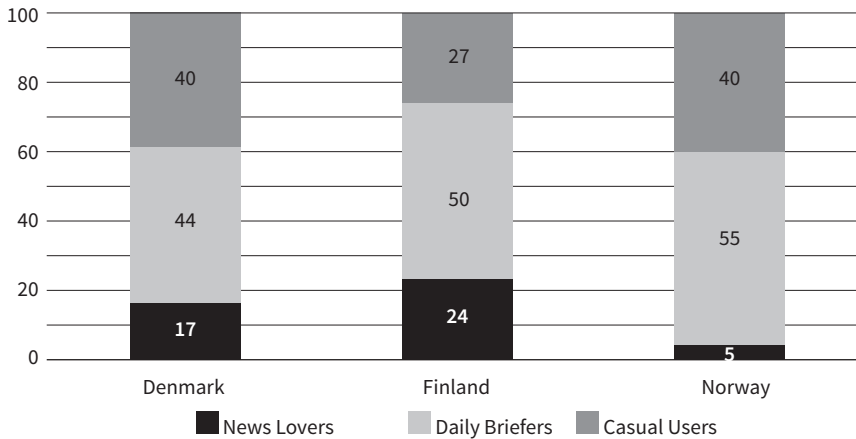


Comment: Denmark, N=2,011. Finland, N=2,007. Norway, N=2,056.

Source: Reuters Digital News Report, 2017.

When asked about general interest in news, the responses differ between the cases. Norwegians appear to be less interested, with 7 per cent claiming to be “extremely” interested. The corresponding numbers in Denmark and Finland are significantly higher (20% and 25%, respectively). This is also reflected when asked about interest in specific kinds of news. Finnish respondents significantly more often state that they are extremely interested in international news (FI: 24%; DK: 17%; NO: 10%), news about their region or city (FI: 34%; DK: 16%; NO: 11%), business and economic news (FI: 13%; DK: 10%; NO: 4%) and health and education news (FI: 17%; DK: 8%; NO: 6%) (see Figure 1). Not only do the Finnish users come across as having the greatest interest in news, they also claim to be more thorough: when asked about specific modes of news use, 60 per cent of Finnish respondents stated that they “read news stories or articles” as a key mode, compared with 41 per cent and 42 per cent in Norway and Denmark.

**Figure 2.** Segmentation into three types of news users, 2018, based on variables on frequency of news use and interest in news combined (per cent)



*Comment:* Denmark, N=2,025. Finland, N=2,012. Norway, N=2,027.

*Source:* Reuters Digital News Report, 2018.

Figure 2 presents how such interests are turned into practices. The figure divides the respondents into three segments: news lovers, daily briefers and casual users. It shows a markedly smaller group of news lovers in Norway (5%) than in the other two cases (FI: 24% and DK: 17%). This confirms the impression given through statements of interests: Norwegians are very eager news consumers to a lesser extent.

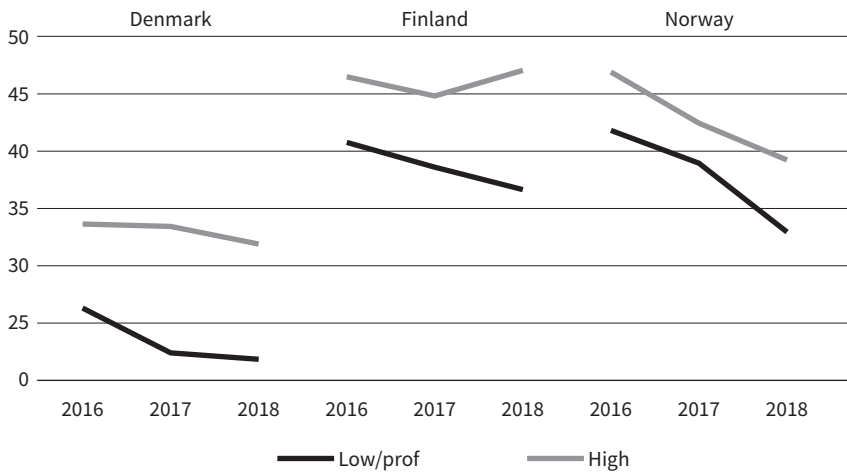
Figure 2 also imparts something about the distribution within each country: in Finland and Norway, over half of the respondents identified as “daily briefers”, while Norway and Denmark have equal percentages of “casual users” (40%). This means that Denmark has the greatest division of the three: a comparatively large segment of news lovers combined with a comparatively large segment of those who only use news

casually. As such, Denmark appear to have a news use pattern that is most at risk of fostering unequal conditions for citizens. Norwegians, on the other hand, through this segmentation analysis, confirm their position as the population that is least interested in news. The question is how these different traits play out in relation to the patterns of willingness to pay between groups with different educational levels.

*Willingness to pay for news*

Recent discussions of willingness to pay for news have tended to focus solely on digital media. However, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how (un)willingness to pay for news might facilitate information gaps and inequality in access to societal information, it is important to include analogue media as well. In the following, I compare the differences between, on the one hand, respondents with low educational levels (high school or lower) and professional qualifications, and, on the other hand, those with university degrees.

**Figure 3.** Distribution of the willingness to pay for print news in the three countries, 2016-2018, per educational level (per cent)



*Comment:* "Low/prof" includes "not completed high school", "high school" and "professional qualification". "High" includes degrees at the Bachelor, Master or PhD level.  
 2016: Denmark, N = 2,041, Finland, N = 2,007, Norway, N = 2,019. 2017: Denmark, N = 2,011, Finland, N = 2,007, Norway, N = 2,056. 2018: Denmark, N = 2,025, Finland, N = 2,012, Norway, N = 2,027.

*Source:* Reuters Digital News Report, 2016-2018.

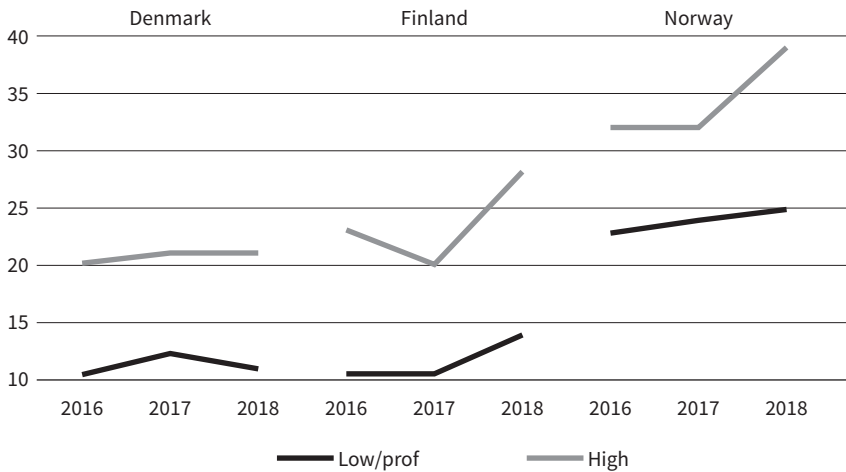
Figure 3 covers print news, in the form of both subscriptions and (ir)regular direct sales. The overall differences in levels between the three countries are striking: the Danish case stands out with generally much lower numbers; the probability of highly educated Danes paying for print news is lower than the probability among the less educated Finnish. Another striking difference between the cases concerns the general

trends from 2016 to 2018. While we should be careful not to overstate tendencies based on three data points, the Norwegian case shows a much steeper fall in willingness to pay for print news – for groups with high (an 8 percentage point drop) as well as low/professional education (a 9 percentage point drop). Finland, in contrast, experienced a more moderate fall (4 percentage points for the “low/prof” category) and even a slight increase for those with university degrees.

The findings reveal inequality in practices for this kind of news provision in the sense that those with a low educational level consistently reported less willingness to pay for news. Importantly, the gaps between the two groups also increased over the three years in all the cases, though only slightly in Norway and Denmark (1 and 2 percentage points, respectively) and more in Finland (5 percentage points).

So far, the findings point to inequalities in access. They also seem to confirm some features of the different countries, such as a less strong tradition of newspaper subscriptions in Denmark. It is difficult to judge, though, whether the general, comparably low willingness to pay for print in Denmark is balanced by a willingness to pay for online media and, similarly, whether the steep decline in Norway is balanced by a general rise in the willingness to pay for journalism online. The question also remains of how Finnish respondents’ continued practices with print news are coupled with their online practices.

**Figure 4.** Distribution of the willingness to pay for online news in the three countries, 2016-2018, by educational level (per cent)



*Comment:* 2016: Denmark, N = 2,041, Finland, N = 2,007, Norway, N = 2,019. 2017: Denmark, N = 2,011, Finland, N = 2,007, Norway, N = 2,056. 2018: Denmark, N = 2,025, Finland, N = 2,012, Norway, N = 2,027.

*Source:* Reuters Digital News Report, 2016-2018.

Figure 4 follows the same logic as Figure 3 but presents the findings for willingness to pay for online news in any form, whether subscription based or not, including differ-

ent forms of bundling with other digital products. Giving attention first to the overall differences between the countries, Norway clearly had the highest willingness to pay. Denmark and Finland come across as more similar, especially for the two first years, while Finnish respondents reported higher numbers in 2018. When seen in relation to the findings regarding print news presented above, these observations show that Denmark lags behind in general willingness to pay: it is low for print as well as digital news. The Finnish remaining practices with regard to print news means that the overall probability of people having access to for-pay journalism is higher, despite the slow uptake of for-pay online news. Norwegians, on the other hand, seem to trade print news for online news, in the sense that the fast decline in paying for print is countered, at least partly, by comparatively high numbers of people paying for online news, with an increase over the time period studied.

Regarding the differences between the two educational groups, it is worth noting that the increase from 2016 to 2018 is by and large made up of those with high educational levels. More interestingly, the gaps between the two groups are either stable (10 percentage points in Denmark) or increasing (from 12 to 14 percentage points in Finland and from 9 to 14 percentage points in Norway). Importantly, the gaps between the groups are more substantive than those for print media.

In sum, in the transfer from print to online news, Danish news providers seem to be stuck with a customer base with lower willingness to pay – a problem that is less significant in Norway (where users pay for online news to a larger extent) and less critical in Finland (where users still pay for print news). Even in the group with a low educational level, 37 per cent of the respondents have paid for a print newspaper in the last week. As such, print newspapers still constitute an egalitarian, and much used, source of news in Finland. When it comes to online news, however, the picture is more skewed towards groups with higher education. Here, Finland is very similar to Denmark. However, in Denmark, the egalitarianism of print news seems to be absent: not only is paying for print news a practice that is more widespread among the higher-educated groups, it is also in general less widespread. In comparison, more Danes rely on free news sources, those with low educational levels more so than those with higher levels. The analysis has, however, shown that such differences characterize all the case countries across the print and digital spheres. If free news becomes less thorough and more tabloidized, this difference will constitute a challenge for attempts to secure just distribution of resources for citizenship.

## Conclusion

The first objective of this paper was to bring out the differences between cases that at the outset, and when viewed from afar, seem alike – in this case, the countries of Denmark, Finland and Norway. These countries represent what are often promoted as key examples of a certain model of welfare states. The second aim

was to scrutinize the systematic differences in news use within such relatively egalitarian societies.

The data and discussion presented here offered up-to-date insights into news consumption in three countries at the forefront of the development of the digital media uptake. I compared interest in news and types of news use and then focused on willingness to pay for news. To sum up what characterizes each of the cases, I could perhaps use the following descriptions. Norwegian news consumption seems to have engaged full speed ahead towards a digital future but risks losing some key news habits and key components of the press structure on the way. The respondents in Norway stand out as being overall more prone to use digital media in a “more advanced” way, for example paying for content. By comparison, Finnish news users seem to be solid but slow if the aim is a transition to digital media. Traditional news media and habits seem to be stronger in Finland than in the two other cases. The upside then, is that the key components of news use, such as paying for a newspaper and showing a high level of interest in news, remain strong – at least so far. Danish news users, on the other hand, might be said to be moving quickly towards digital news, like Norwegians, but without taking up the habit of paying for it. This illustrates that systematic small-N comparisons based on comparable data can be helpful when “thickening” our understanding of how cases that are often lumped together can show differences.

Within the cases, the comparison highlighted differences. I focused on educational levels. Concerning interest in news, the analysis showed that Denmark has the biggest (relatively speaking) divide between those with little interest and less substantial news habits and those with high interest levels, the avid news users. By identifying the groups that are least likely to pay for news off- and online, the analysis showed how the general pattern in Denmark – described above as a fast move towards digital while keeping the tendency to avoid paying – is unequally spread among the population. Groups with less education are much less prone to pay for news of any kind. Though there are important differences between the cases, the findings indicate clearly skewed patterns of news use in groups with different educational levels in all three countries. As such, even in the Nordic region, with favourable policy frameworks, high ICT penetration and comparatively well-functioning journalistic media, this main way to access relevant societal information is tilted towards those with higher education. If the differences between for-pay and for-free news are substantial, the consequence is inequality in the resources that people have to act as citizens.

Further research should include analyses of journalistic content to determine how differences between for-pay and for-free news develop. The findings presented here, however, underline the importance of regulatory authorities that are interested in facilitating just opportunities for access to societal information paying attention to the conditions for news provision for which citizens do not have to pay.

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