



THE PANDEMIC AND THE MEDIA SYSTEM: THE CASE OF NORWAY

Abstract

Norwegian media and journalism have for some time struggled to cope with the crises brought by digitalisation and globalisation: an increased output and accessibility of free digital media and social media, the loss of readership and advertising revenue of print media, layoffs of journalists and an generally uncertain future of news. Put together these factors could possibly challenge the very foundation of the democratic corporatist media system of Norway. As the pandemic struck in 2020, one could expect the media crises to get even worse and possibly bring changes of a systemic level. But Norwegian media have seemingly handled the pandemic quite well, and the media system has definitely not been rocked by it. Possible explanations for this state of affairs: the media's handling of the pandemic, media policy in the pandemic and the long-term status of the digital transformation of the media, will be discussed here.

Keywords: media systems, Norway, Scandinavia, pandemic, digital media, newspapers, TV, media policy

Streszczenie

Norweskie media, i środowisko dziennikarskie w ogóle, od wielu lata zmagają się z kryzysami wywołanymi przez cyfryzację i globalizację: zwiększoną podażą i dostępnością darmowych mediów cyfrowych, spadkiem czytelnictwa i wpływów z reklamy w mediach drukowanych, zwolnieniami dziennikarzy i niepewnością co do przyszłego kształtu wiadomości. Już samo współistnienie tych czynników wystarczyłoby, żeby doprowadzić do głębokich przeobrażeń demokratyczno-korporacyjnego systemu medialnego Norwegii. Można było się spodziewać, że wybuch pandemii w 2020 zaostrzy wymienione tendencje kryzysowe i potencjalnie doprowadzi do zmian na poziomie systemowym. Jednak mediom w Norwegii udało się przetrwać pandemię bez większego uszczerbku, a z całą pewnością nie zatrzęsły się z jej powodu w posadach. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie możliwych przyczyn tego stanu rzeczy: strategii przyjętych przez media w trakcie pandemii, polityki medialnej władz podyktowanej jej wybuchem oraz długofalowych konsekwencji cyfrowej transformacji mediów.

Słowa kluczowe: systemy medialne, Norwegia, Skandynawia, pandemia, media cyfrowe, gazety, telewizja, polityka medialna

Introduction¹

As the pandemic struck in early 2020, media and journalism in Norway were victims to the same kind of uncertainty as the population in general, fearing for the survival of people, businesses and maybe even society in general. As the pandemic unfolded, its consequences appeared to be quite the opposite regarding Norwegian media: no major media business succumbed during the pandemic, and 2021 became one of the most profitable years for in a long time. What happened, and why?

In this paper we will analyse the pandemic from a media systems perspective based on the ideas of Hallin & Mancini (2004, 2017), which brands Norwegian and Nordic media systems as “democratic corporatist” with features like a strong printed press, staunch support for state intervention in the media (public service broadcasting and press subsidies) and independent journalism being the norm. All within a system of political pluralism.

Central European countries were not classified according to the original model by Hallin and Mancini – which is in itself a point of criticism. It has been suggested that Central European media systems may be more akin to the polarized pluralist model of the Mediterranean or Southern Europe (Jakubowicz, 2008). Factors pointing towards such a conclusion are as follows: a lower penetration of printed newspapers, strong and direct state intervention in the media and a weaker level of independent journalism.

The Hallin & Mancini Model has generated an abundance of new research, applications and of course criticism (Bastiansen, 2008; Brüggemann et al., 2014; Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Willig & Nord, 2021). Sjøvaag (2019) has presented and overview of the critique of the Hallin & Mancini model. One point of criticism is that the theory is “stuck in the analog era”. The growth and increasing dominance of digital media has not only brought changes to the media and society in general, but also to the notion of national state borders as an important barrier against the influence of global players such as Facebook and Google. Within these national borders hybrid systems are emerging, in which newspapers are transforming from analogue, print based media to hybrid multimedia businesses with different logics. Nevertheless, path dependency links hybrid media to the past, which is probably what keeps the media system from collapsing altogether.

Another question regarding media systems is the issue of change. When do media systems change? What are the criteria for establishing that a change has occurred? The 1989 changes in Central Eastern Europe could be a starting point for such deliberations, as the entire political system was overturned, thus the media were also transformed in profound ways. There is an ongoing and unresolved debate on these issues, not least because important features of the political and media systems seem to be in constant flux.

The question regarding changes of a media system should be addressed to Western liberal democracies as well, not least because the Hallin and Mancini model was developed based on data and knowledge regarding these countries and systems. One must ask whether one abrupt event like the pandemic could really have challenged the foundations of a media system to such a degree?

In this respect one could draw attention to the media perception of the pandemic as it was declared a national emergency in the spring of 2020. The Norwegian media declared a state of emergency early on, and the government was warned about the coming of mass

¹ Two previous versions of this article were presented as conference papers in 2022: First at a conference in Wrocław, Poland, in May 2022 and later in October 2022 in Stavanger, Norway. I am grateful for all comments received from competent researchers at those two conferences.

closures of media businesses. We will present and discuss the design of the support-scheme for Norwegian media later on, but what is important in this context is the fact that the media asked for support – which was granted by the government, and which was twice the size of media support in a “normal” year.

One could also expect different media systems to be differently vulnerable to changes in times of change and crises. A high level of newspaper readership is increasingly an anomaly in a digital society – meaning that one of the most important features of the media system is undergoing change. State support for the media can also vary – sometimes dramatically. New Zealand is an example of a country in which government support for public service broadcasting in the traditional sense has all but disappeared (Mollgaard, 2018; Scherer & Sam, 2012).

In a country like Norway the public service broadcaster NRK is the only media outlet that covers news and current affairs as part of its default programming. Other television companies have been acquired by international companies, and the only other news-reporting television channel (TV 2) is obliged to do so by a government contract, also approved by the ESA (Klevmo et al., 2019). The culture of journalism and its insistence on independence has also been challenged by the harsh economic realities of media businesses losing market shares and firing journalists for the last decade.

How does this backdrop relate to what empirical studies can tell of the development of Norwegian media during the pandemic?

1. The media systems and the pandemic

The point of departure for the empirical presentation of the pandemic’s effects on the Scandinavian media landscape is a book published by Nordicom (Ohlsson et al., 2021). The book presents the status of the pandemic and the media in the Nordic countries within a media systems perspective in order to convey a general overview of media in the middle of the pandemic.

One conclusion from Ohlsson et al. (2021) is that the pandemic did not lead to disastrous results for news media in the Nordic countries in the short term. What is more, it seems that the long-term development trend of the media seems to have continued through the pandemic, and some of its aspect (especially digitalisation) may have indeed accelerated.

The pandemic had some consequences that could be seen as positive from a media standpoint: the audience sought information regarding the pandemic from news media, especially public service broadcasters, on the presumption that information from such sources was of higher quality than non-editorial content. Ohlsson et al. (2022) also found that news media acting as gatekeepers enjoyed a high level of trust in the majority of the general public.

In late 2022 the pandemic is almost forgotten, as the war in Ukraine has become the mega-event causing much of the same want for information as the pandemic. Maybe the audience shift towards editorial news sources during the pandemic has had some vaccine-like effect on this crisis, and perhaps it will extend it to future ones as well.

One could expect a similar outcome across all the Nordic countries, as from a media systems perspective they are indeed quite similar, democratic corporatist media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). But there are also important differences between the Nordic countries regarding media structures and economies, and as such also their media policy response to the crisis brought upon media by the pandemic. Thus, one could not rule out different outcomes of the crises in various Nordic countries. For instance, the level of govern-

ment intervention in the media is quite different: where Norway and Sweden grant subsidies to newspapers perceived as needing support, Finland has almost no media subsidies, and Denmark has an arrangement of general support for all newspapers. Thus, it would be too simplistic to merely state that Norway and the other Nordic countries were so rich that the government simply picked up the pandemic bill for the media.

Other studies have researched other aspect of the pandemic and media, demonstrating a strong interest in contemporary events from the community of media researchers – a number of these studies are quoted in Roppen (2022). A number of studies on the media and the pandemic are also in the process of being published. One research project by the BI (Norwegian Business School) called *Media innovation through the corona crisis (2020)* is of significant interest. Preliminary results from the project indicate conclusions not dissimilar from those presented in this article (Barland, 2022; Solvoll, 2022).

2. Research questions

The main questions are: how has the pandemic challenged the Norwegian media system, and whether certain serious challenges lead to changes at a systemic level? As we have seen, the first results reported by Ohlsson et al. (2021) suggested few changes for Nordic media, including Norway. The chapter dealing with Norway was written by Bia Sjøvoll and Hallvard Moe from the University of Bergen. The contributing authors were careful in their assessments, as in mid-2021 the pandemic had not yet been brought under control.

The statistics in Sjøvoll & Moe (2021) were the most important source of information for drawing the preliminary pandemic-related conclusions of the Norwegian media landscape in 2021. At the time of writing of this article we now have access to another full year of statistical data. Do the conclusions from 2021 still hold up? And are we closer to an understanding of the results?

3. Changes between 2021 and 2022

Below I will present data in the same sequence as Sjøvoll & Moe (2021) and provide figures for the development of advertising, audience, media regulations as well as the structure and economy of the news media. Relevant sources are mentioned in connection to the specific topic when pertinent, but the main source of statistics is the Medienorge collection of media data by the University of Bergen, Norway. Medienorge collects and presents data from a number of sources, thus one must look into every table (linked in the text) to learn more about the data.

3.1 Advertising

Sjøvoll and Moe described a high level of uncertainty in the industry and several reports of media businesses losing advertising, as customers were forced to reduce spendings in 2020 and 2021. In the short term, a loss of 20–40% of advertising was reported.

Several reports regarding advertising in 2021 have become available. The report from the IRM (Institut för Reklam- och Mediastatistik – Institute for Advertising and Media Statistics) analyzes the total revenue from advertising for the media, measured only in cash-flow, thus special deals and rebates did not influence the results. According to IRM and Medienorge, advertising investments in Norway fell by 7% from 2019 to 2020, a substantial decline corresponding to decreased economic activity in Norway.

However in the following year the value of advertising in Norway increased by about 15% and the total amount was higher than in 2019. According to another source of statistics, the MIO (Mediebyråenes Interesseorganisasjon, Media Agencies Organisation) reached similar results regarding the development of spending on advertising from 2019–2021 (*Reklameomsetning via mediebyråer*, 2022). Thus, one could conclude that advertising returned to pre-pandemic levels, which significantly impacted media revenues and activities.

But a continuing increase in online advertising, and continuing decline in market shares for TV and printed media (newspapers, magazines and direct mail) is also apparent. Thus, the pre-pandemic long-term development trend is ongoing.

The numbers taken from the IRM point to a complex and interrelated market and do not tell the whole story, as newspaper companies also receive (increasing) revenue from online media and (to an extent) broadcasting, while TV companies also receive online revenue.

The share of the national revenue generated from taxing global players such as Google and Facebook is hard to estimate, as these companies do not report revenue from specific countries. Estimates provided by the Norwegian Media Authority show that total advertising revenues for global players in Norway account for almost 50% of total advertising, and have increased strongly (Medietilsynet, 2022, p. 13).

The key takeaway here is that the bounce-back of advertising also gave Norwegian media businesses a strong growth impulse in revenues in 2021, thus making some of the apocalyptic prophecies in the beginning of the pandemic looking quite exaggerated.

A report from Statistics Norway from 2022 also states that the effects of the pandemic were quite similar in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, despite different strategies of handling the pandemic (Blytt et al., 2022), the Nordic countries were not as hard struck by the pandemic as other countries, and recovered comparatively faster. Reasons for this puzzling development are a matter for other research projects, but in this context we can say that the advertising market bounced back as a result of the economy in general never really having stopped working, as well as its fast recovery.

A special report regarding the Norwegian government's handling of the pandemic was established as early as in April 2020, and the main report was published in two parts in the consecutive years (Koronakommisjonen 2021, 2022). The number of deaths in Norway caused by the pandemic is quite low compared to other EU countries (Statistik sentralbyrå, 2022).

3.2 Audiences

Sjøvoll and Moe (2021) reported immediate changes in media consumption as the pandemic struck. This applies to TV, online media and online newspapers. The changes were so strong that some expected the pandemic to break with long trends of media use.

During the pandemic the market share of the main PSB channel NRK 1 increased significantly from 31.9% in 2019 to 35.7% in 2020, and 35.9% in 2021. The news channel TV 2 Nyhetskanalen owned by the competing media group TV 2 increased its market share from

3.5% to 4.3% of total viewing time. Both channels devoted substantial airtime to the pandemic, thus it's likely the pandemic was the cause of their increase in market share. Other TV channels in Norway don't have news departments.² The increasing viewership of NRK1 and TV 2 Nyhetskanalen was also commented on by Sjøvoll & Moe, and the increased market shares continued and even accelerated for both channels in 2021. Audience shares for NRK and TV 2 Nyhetskanalen are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Market-share of NRK1 and TV 2 Nyhetskanalen (2018–2021).

	2018	2019	2020	2021
NRK 1	30.5%	31.9%	35.7%	35.9%
TV 2 Nyhetskanalen	3.7%	3.5%	4.3%	4.5%

Source: Kantar TNS/Medienorge

Interestingly, another survey suggests there were no changes in the audience perception of what news source was “most important” to them during the pandemic. “The Internet” has been the most important source of news since the annual survey started in 2010, and this did not change during the pandemic (*Min viktigste nyhetskilde*, 2022).

In a European context, the Nordic countries have been early adopters of online media, reaching a high level of broadband and smartphone penetration earlier than most other countries of the continent. Thus, media and other businesses have also been able to reach the general audience by digital channels for quite some time, and markets and businesses have matured into thinking digital.

By the year 2000 more than 50% of Norwegians had access to broadband connection, 10 years later the percentage grew to a whopping 90%. It stayed at a stable 98% during the last few years, so suffice to say almost all Norwegians have had access to high-speed Internet for some years before the pandemic (*Andel med tilgang til internett*, 2022).

Smartphones spread even faster than broadband. In the last 5 years more than 90% of Norwegians have had access to a smartphone, which of course also is a broadband terminal.

Regarding daily use of online and mobile media, as early as in 2005 more than 50% of the general audience reported they were online every day. In the last few years, the level has reached 90% and remains about the same, regardless of the means of connection.

People in general were buying computers, broadband access and online services as well as expensive smartphones, but were reluctant to pay for news on the same platforms.

This seems to be changing, however. In 2015 only 15% of the audience were paying for online news, but in 2021 this figure doubled to 29%. The development in 2018 brought the editor of the journal *Norsk medietidsskrift* to state that things have turned for the better for the media business, now that media have cracked the problem of making the audience pay for online content (Barland, 2018).

One troublesome fact regarding paywalls in news media seems to be that the people who actually pay for news content are mostly well off, which could possibly lead to a less informed underclass of citizens who can't afford online news. This stands in sharp contrast to the 1990s, when most households subscribed to a least one newspaper. The long-term effects of the lack of access to news are difficult to predict, not least because NRK also publishes news for free.

² The Norwegian government annually pays the private company TV 2 135 million NOK to emit public service content (Medietilsynet, 2021b).

Regarding the readership of the printed press, sales of printed newspapers are slowly declining, and the trend continued through the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. One could think that the increased demand for news during the pandemic would affect this segment of the media market in some positive way, but it did nothing to stem the slow but steady agony of the printed press.

During the pandemic the audience and media consumption was less affected, as people still had access to their mobile phones and their broadband connections, and the media had both the knowledge and the motivation to carry out operations during the pandemic.

From a media systems perspective high levels of newspaper readership and a high number of newspaper businesses seem to be two sides of the same coin. It's too early to say whether the digital-only newspapers of the future will succeed in reaching most of the general audience.

3.3 Regulations

Sjøvoll & Moe (2021) considered the government support to be crucial for the survival of media, and at the time their article was published it was indeed probably the case.

A policy of state intervention in the media has enjoyed broad political support in Norway, and is also safeguarded in the Norwegian constitution, which expects the government to "create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse" (Grunnloven, 1814 amend. 2021, section C, art. 100). It is important to stress that media are not owned or run by the government, apart from the PSB. Editorial independence is also safeguarded by law, which means that neither the government nor other owners can instruct the staff of media outlets in editorial matters (Mediefridomslova, 2008, § 4) The law is in accordance with a long-standing principle in Norwegian media (*Redaktørplakaten*, 2019).

NRK, as a PSB, carries no advertising and because its normal state funding continued uninterrupted during the pandemic, it could run its operations almost as normal, apart from the fact that most of the staff were at times working from their homes.

As the pandemic struck, the question of supporting media during a crisis was quickly raised. Media businesses received support according to the same principles as other businesses hurt by the pandemic. The specific regulation of news media was designed in a way that only media that suffered a loss of 15% or more of their "normal" revenue were eligible to receive the pandemic media support package, and 300 million NOK was set aside for the purpose. These kind of arrangements are usually discussed in close accord with the media business, thus the media were well acquainted with the size of the funding and the criteria for media outlets to receive it.

A report from the media authority from 2021 states that 25% of Norwegian newspapers (most of them either local or regional) received support due to the pandemic. At the end of the day less than 33% of the total funding was awarded to newspapers, as only a few of them lost 15% or more of revenue (Barland, 2022). Thus the government set aside more money for supporting the media than was needed, which is a strong sign of government willingness to support media in troubled times.

A few broadcasting companies also received relief funding, but in general the TV and radio business did quite well during the pandemic.

It's entirely possible that the promise of government support at the very least gave media businesses, advertisers and the audience a kind of reassurance about the continued survival of the media, so they should continue to do business (and, in case of the audience, carry on consuming).

From the media systems perspectives it is quite clear that the government had no intention of changing the foundations of the media policy.

3.4 The pandemic and the structure and economy of news media

A report from the Norwegian Media Authority published in July of 2021 mapped the impact of the pandemic on the media (Medietilsynet, 2021a). Its conclusions were surprisingly optimistic and stated that 2021 turned out to be a good year not only for newspapers, but also media in general. Is the state of affairs equally encouraging in 2022?

We will now look closer into the pandemic and it's effect upon the Norwegian news media: newspapers, broadcasting and journalists.

3.4.1 Newspapers: Even more digital

Sjøvoll & Moe (2021) quoted figures that showed a sharp decline in revenues for newspapers in the first part of the pandemic. These findings were later confirmed by Barland (2022), including newspapers already struggling with profitability, news media in small markets, advertising-based news media, businesses with new or additional costs (digital technology). But things suddenly changed. A report published by the Media Authority in 2022 observed a positive trend and stated that 2021 was actually "a very good year" for newspapers as businesses in Norway (Medietilsynet, 2022). Total revenues were 3.8% higher than in 2019 – before the pandemic. And EBITDA for newspaper businesses increased by 25% from 2020 to 2021. This means newspaper businesses in general were able to make a profit throughout the entire pandemic.

What are the reasons of this surprising turn of events? Some of them can probably be traced to the developments in the decades before the pandemic, as well as the response from newspapers during the pandemic, but also to the fact that even though society went under complete lockdown, businesses were run mostly in a close to normal fashion, at least for the most part.

A significant portion of the Norwegian populace has been online for 20 years or so, which was then compounded by a 10-year market penetration of broadband and smartphones. This greatly influenced the business model of newspapers. As customers are to be sought mostly online, the media is also trying to serve (paying) customers online. One does not need to be in physical proximity to sources, advertisers or the product, as most work is done online.

According to a report from the Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet, 2022), newspapers as businesses seem to have shifted the trend from steady decline in total revenues to an increase in the last few years – because digital revenues are steadily rising, especially those from readers (as opposed to advertisers).

The newspaper industry in Norway is dominated by three large players: Schibsted, Amedia and Polaris. The case of Amedia demonstrates the shift in revenue streams from print advertising to digital readership: in 2013 advertising was its most important source of revenue, with a total of 43%. Sales to readers (print subscription, digital subscription, single copies) accounted for 27% of revenue. In 2021 this relation was turned upside down: advertising (print and online) accounted for 31%, while sales to readers (print and digital) accounted for 49% (Årsrapport 2021). Interestingly, both the Norwegian Media Authority and media/business researchers encouraged newspaper businesses to press on with a digital transformation towards user centered products (Bakke et al., 2021).

As the pandemic struck, journalists were forced to work from home, but so were their sources as well as the readers – so it was possible to communicate and convey information.

In a way, it was business as usual, just online. Apart from the fact that the pandemic was, of course, highly unusual.

The total number of newspapers did not change in 2020–2021, and no major media corporation folded due to the pandemic. Thus, important aspects of the media structure were not at all changed by the pandemic.

3.4.2 Broadcasting: Business (almost) as usual

No major structural changes occurred in the Norwegian broadcasting market during the pandemic.

The main development trend of the last decade regarding television media consumption has been a strong decline in viewership of “linear” TV, and an increased interest in on-demand content such as Netflix. But this shift began before the pandemic, with media analysts pointing to 2018 as the year of major change, as this is when the percentage of the audience watching linear TV dropped from 60 to 48%. In 2021 the rate of people watching daily television is 46% (*TV-seing en gjennomsnittsdag*, 2022).

As viewership habits steadily shift towards on-demand content, TV channels are losing market shares in the advertising market. In 2016 television received 20% of the total share of advertising in Norway, while in 2021 it was reduced to 15%. One could expect the pandemic and work-from-home would attract a larger audience to the TV screens, but that did not occur.

Around 69% of Norwegians had access to some kind of on-demand service in 2019, and in 2021 this percentage increased to 74% (*Andel med abonnement på strømmetjenester for film og TV-serier*, 2022). Of the on-demand platforms, Netflix has by far the largest share of paying subscribers, as 66% of Norwegians have access to the platform.

The sales of TV equipment increased by 20% from 2019 to 2020, so one could assume that the audience did not necessarily spend more time watching TV, but quite possibly spent more time in front of equipment of higher quality – or bought a second, third or fourth TV set (*Salg av TV-utstyr*, 2022).

The total daily viewing time for TV has been decreasing for the last decade. In 2019 and 2020 Norwegian spent 117 and 118 minutes before a television screen, but in 2021 the amount decreased to 108 minutes (*Samlet TV-seing per år*, 2022).

3.4.3 Media staff

From a media systems perspective, independent journalism is an important feature of democratic corporatist media systems. But independent journalism cannot work without journalists, and their number has been in decline since 2008. Most Norwegian journalists are members of the trade union Norsk Journalistlag (Norwegian Union of Journalists), thus the number of members in NJ corresponds with the total number of journalists.³

The total number of members of the NJ reached a top level in 2008 with 9739 members. The following years brought a decline in number of members until a low point in 2020 with 7879 members, a reduction of about 20%. As the pandemic struck, there were several reports of lay-offs in the media in 2021, but some media outlets were also hiring new personnel.

³ PR consultants are not allowed as members of the NJ.

As the figures of 2021 were being completed, and an increase of members of NJ of 1.6% was noted.⁴ The press organ of the NJ (*Journalisten*) also reported that the increase was continuing into 2022 (Greger, 2022), and high enrollment rates in schools of journalism and media indicate a strong demand for journalists and other media staff.

Another source also indicates news media have resumed hiring. The aforementioned report from the Norwegian Media Authority states that the total number of employees working in Norwegian newspapers is in fact increasing. From 2020 to 2021 the total workforce in the printed press in Norway increased by 3.4% (Medietilsynet, 2022).

It's too early to tell whether this is a robust turn to the better for the media, but it is a strong indicator of media recovering from the pandemic, not least when seen in the context of reports of strong earnings and increasing profits.

In times of crisis the media might be expected to “rally round the flag” and unanimously support the government. It's hard to find examples of this line of thought in Norway though. Quite the opposite: it's readily apparent that it was the government that regarded the media as very important channels for conveying vital information on handling of the pandemic, and thus their relationship through the crisis was based rather on equal cooperation than enforcing power. The media for their part developed advanced computer assisted reporting methods and services for keeping track of the pandemic as well as the ever-changing regulations. These kinds of innovations are the main point of interest in the previously mentioned report by the BI.

4. Summary of findings

The presentation of data from Norway in the previous paragraphs could be summarized shortly: the pandemic did not change the Norwegian media landscape at a systemic level. This was made possible because the government implemented a policy according to which society, including the media, was supposed to run as close to normal as possible. This policy was more or less also followed by the governments in Sweden and Denmark, and its results there were not very different from those in Norway, which were as follows:

- Advertising took a hit in 2020, but in 2021 reached the 2019 level.
- The audience continued the shift from print media and linear TV towards digital media.
- The audiences were increasingly keen to pay for digital content, especially news and entertainment.
- Media businesses have increased their revenue from digital products.
- Media businesses were and are hiring new staff, and for the first time in decades the total number of journalists is rising.
- TV channels conveying news and public service content have increased market share in 2020 and 2021.

⁴ Data taken from the website of the Norsk Journalistlag (“Medlemsvekst i Norsk Journalistlag”, 2021). A new system for membership was introduced in 2019, so the stated number of members for 2019 is stated as “incorrect” on the website.

5. Concluding remarks

It seems clear that the data Sjøvoll & Moe presented in 2021 were not very far off from what statistics for all of 2021 would show one year later, but their main observation was that the effects of the pandemic were not felt very keenly in Norway – both in regard to media and society in general. Norway is not very different from the other Nordic countries in this respect. One interesting indicator is the arrangement for government support of the media, of which only about 25% was granted to media outlets that struggled the most because of the pandemic.

One very interesting avenue of analysis is the study of creativity being unleashed by the media businesses, facing the grave consequences of the pandemic with innovative strategies (which could also be seen as a reorientation of media businesses towards revenue and profit, however). As the results of the BI's project (*Media innovation through the corona crisis*) is not yet being published, we will just point towards the forthcoming studies from the researchers (Barland, 2022; Solvoll 2022).

More importantly, there are no signs of developments which could crack the media system in Norway on a systemic level: newspapers are still being read by the general audience – although they are increasingly read digitally – but a digital divide is also emerging between paying readers and those who only engage with media content that is available for free. In a strictly “Hallin and Mancini sense”, the important thing is that the state is still willing to intervene in the media market by means of subsidies and by funding public service broadcasting. During the pandemic the government support for the media was increased, and the NRK was a very important channel for conveying news about the dynamic of the disease to the general audience. Finally, there is no evidence pointing to journalism as an institution being altered by the pandemic.

From the context of the last few troubled years, it would not be unreasonable to assume the audience would stop listening to and watching legacy media conveying and discussing public news, and only trust messages posted on social media. Other countries have provided ample evidence of a certain type of political leaders using both legacy and social media as tools for sowing public distrust, casting doubt on the reality and severity of the pandemic and spreading conspiracy-fueled ideas on its origins. In Norway this happened only to a small extent, and hardly in a way that eroded the audience's trust in the government, health officials – or the media. This issue was also addressed by the national “Corona-commission” in their final report (Koronakommisjonen 2021, 2022).

In fact, regarding their standing with the general public, service broadcasting and businesses based on traditional news media (such as newspapers) came out of the crisis stronger than before. One should take notice of the fact that the Nordic nations have the highest levels of social trust in the world. This applies both to interactions between members of the general public, as well as to their attitudes towards government and public authorities such as health experts. The PSB enjoys the highest level of trust, and it is a well known phenomenon that in times of crises or dramatic events PSBs are the media channels the audience will pay most attention to. But still, this could be eligible for change.

All of the evidence presented above leads to a conclusion that a media system can hardly change because of a single event, unless that event is so powerful that it changes the very fabric of politics, media structure and journalism. The pandemic was (and is) a global event, and other pandemics are sure to happen in the future. As society in Norway was under lockdown for much of the pandemic, most people were more or less able to carry on as usual, and that also extends to the media, as we have seen that the pandemic hardly challenged the Norwegian media system in general terms.

The trend towards fully adopting digital media, which definitely continued during the pandemic, had been underway for years. It's quite likely that Norwegian audiences, as well as businesses – and employees – had already achieved digital maturity as reports of the first cases of COVID were beginning to appear. They were able to continue working, and probably also innovating, during the pandemic, and this brought a certain level of resilience, also softening the effects of the pandemic. In that case one might think that the pandemic actually has strengthened Norwegian media, and potentially even the foundations of the media system and the general level of trust and understanding of interdependence in society.

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