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ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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The Nordic countries have often been praised as environmental forerunners by international and domestic media. Such an outstanding environmental reputation is in part explained by international comparisons placing the Nordic countries in top positions. One of the most influential rankings has been the Environmental Performance Index, published under the auspices of the World Economic Forum and developed by Yale University and Columbia University. The first version of the ranking was published in 2005 (Esty, Levy, Srebotnjak, & de Sherbinin, 2005). It placed Finland in the top position, followed by Norway in second place, Sweden in fourth place, and Iceland in fifth place. The last of the five Nordic countries, Denmark, was ranked as 26th among the 146 countries. Through the years, the positions of the Nordic countries have changed, but they still remain among the top performers. All the Nordic countries ranked among the top 14 of the 180 countries in 2018 (EPI, 2018).

The reputation of the Nordic countries as environmental leaders is based on various international and domestic policy initiatives. Sweden claims to be among the forerunners of environmental protection based on measures taken against acidification, the regulation of chemicals, and the control of industrial activities (Anshelm & Hultman, 2015, p. 2). Sweden hosted the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The landmark conference gave birth to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). It also motivated Nordic journalists to cover environmental issues and generated considerable public attention.

During the era of the Cold War, Finland arranged a landmark conference aimed to bring together the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. Environmental issues were a relatively neutral new topic that enabled discussions between hostile Western and Soviet blocks. The conference resulted in the Helsinki Treaty, or, more formally, the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area of 1974. This was the first international environmental agreement aimed to take into account all the sources of pollution to an entire sea. The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, also known as Helsinki Commission
(HELCOM) has been working as an intergovernmental organization collecting information, governing, and assessing the implementation of the treaty up to date. Information collected by HELCOM has also helped journalists to cover regional-level cross-national environmental issues that often remain poorly addressed by the media.

Norway was recognized as the first country to officially establish a specific ministry of the environment (in 1972). The prime minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, was in the headlines during the late 1980s as she headed the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The commission coined the often-cited definition of sustainable development as a holistic concept incorporating the needs of the present and future generations and the three pillars of economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality. This conceptualization has been important for environmental journalism, since it connects the environment with wider societal and economic concerns.

Not all environmental activities involving the Nordic countries have been undeniable successes. For example, the Copenhagen 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference was expected to deliver a strong international agreement of actions for climate change mitigation. Despite the efforts by the hosting country Denmark, the result was a weak “Copenhagen Accord.” The summit generated one of the sharpest peaks of global news coverage on climate issues (Schmidt, Ivanova, & Schäfer, 2013). It showed the limits of influence of a single small nation state under the pressures of economic and policy interests of more powerful actors.

The Nordic countries’ demand for energy and natural resources is high (IEA, 2017). The Nordic countries are highly dependent on exports and imports and therefore much of their environmental impact occurs in the other countries that are part of their long production and consumption chains. Although the population of the Nordic countries is only 27 million, the Nordic economy is the 12th largest in the world (Grunfelder, Rispling, & Norlén, 2018). The tension between a progressive environmental image and the environmental burden related to high material consumption is one of the basic features of environmental journalism in the Nordic countries.

All Nordic countries have intensively utilized their natural resources. The economy of Sweden is currently dominated by the service sector, but a considerable share of the country’s prosperity has historically originated from the mining sector and heavy industry, both with serious ecological impacts. The economy of Norway is highly reliant on the oil and gas resources of the North Sea and the country is a major exporter of fossil fuels. In Denmark, environmental impacts of the agricultural sector are a key topic of environmental policy, especially since the country has a much smaller land area and a higher population density than the other Nordic countries, leading to intensive land use. The fish industry has a high importance for Iceland and Norway. Public debate highlighting concerns related to the rights to use the natural resources partly explains why Iceland and Norway have remained outside the European Union, unlike the other Nordic countries.

**The media systems of the Nordic countries**

In addition to the environmental rankings, the Nordic countries often occupy the top positions of international comparisons describing the status of media systems, such as freedom of the press, societal openness, and freedom of expression, democracy, literacy, digitalization, and information society. The Nordic countries are characterized by a long tradition of mass literacy and high-quality education systems providing equal learning opportunities for whole populations. The countries have been forerunners of the development of information and communication technologies and are among the most advanced countries concerning access and use of digital media.
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The countries, especially Finland, are also characterized by high levels of trust towards media (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Kleis Nielsen, 2018). The trust is in part explained by a liberal democratic policy system that appreciates freedom of expression, transparency of administration, and openness of public policy documents, as well as a low level of corruption. These are also important background factors for environmental journalism.

The Nordic countries share much history and are relatively homogenous in cultural, social, and economic terms. The countries have similar media systems characterized by high news readership and strong subscription traditions (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014). Historically, newspapers have been widely read and the societal role of high-quality newspapers is still relatively strong. However, concerns have increasingly been voiced over whether commercialization is compromising the quality of news production.

The Nordic media systems are characterized by self-imposed ethical regulations. The journalism industry has been committed to self-regulation through national press councils. The design of these press councils varies by the country, but generally they are independent organizations, established to give audiences a venue for complaint against news outlets. They function as a combination courtroom and ombudsperson, and their role is to judge whether the news organization has violated the journalistic code of ethics.

The journalistic codes of ethics sometimes include specific mentions of environmental issues. They indicate that environmental issues have established a place in the discussions related to the ethical foundations of the journalistic profession in Nordic countries.

The languages of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are distinct but similar, while the language of Iceland differs considerably, and the Finnish language belongs to a completely different language family. In practice, English has gradually become the second most important language in the region.

The communication systems of the Nordic countries have been labeled as democratic-corporatist, characterized by early development and broad diffusion of mass media, a high degree of professionalization and self-regulation of media, a strong political media tradition, and independence from political groups (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). State subsidy systems aimed to secure pluralism in the media have been widely supported. The countries have a strong national public service television along with commercial television and radio. Newspapers are privately owned, and the societal role of regional and local press has been relatively strong. Ownership of the commercial media has been somewhat concentrated as there are strong national publishers.

Even though the small media markets and distinctive national languages have buffered the Nordic media systems against global competition, the economic, social, and technological globalization processes and increasing commercialization are pushing the media systems towards a liberal market model. The number of subscribers of print editions of nearly all newspapers has declined during the past decades (NORDICOM, 2018). Rapid technological change, digitalization, and new earning models have put pressure on journalistic work, including environmental journalism. However, the changes have been less dramatic than in many other countries. Currently, Norway, Sweden, and Finland are leading countries to persuade consumers to pay for online news content (Newman et al., 2018). The national publishers are trying to find ways to support high-quality journalism with various combinations of open access and paywall strategies (in the context of wealthy societies with relatively small numbers of publishers limiting the competition).

The development of environmental journalism in the Nordic context

The social, economic, political, geographical, and ecological features of the Nordic countries provide a specific context to report about environmental issues. The content of environmental
reporting, the structure of media organizations and institutions, and the practices of environmental journalism are all affected by the relatively small media markets. Few journalists concentrate full-time on environmental issues. For example, the Finnish Environmental Journalists Association, founded in 1991, has more than 120 active members, most of them covering environmental issues part-time. Likewise, the Swedish Association for Environmental Journalists, founded in 1990, has about 100 members. These numbers are low if compared with the number of all journalists. National associations (serving as trade unions) for journalists have about 15,000 members in both countries.

The exact number of environmental journalists is hard to estimate because of difficulties of defining who qualifies as an environmental journalist and what should be counted as an environmental issue (Sachsman, Simon, & Valenti, 2010). Most of the journalists cover environmental issues only occasionally and part-time and many of them work as freelancers. The importance of other actors than journalists involved in science communication has also increased in recent years (Lyytimäki et al., 2013). These actors span from laypersons actively commenting on environmental issues to individual scientists blogging or tweeting about their own work and to research projects, groups, and communication departments of various organizations. For example, the Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists has over a thousand members, many of them covering science and health issues closely related to environmental issues and working for a research institute or university instead of the news media.

The late 1960s and 1970s can be characterized as a pioneer phase of environmental journalism in the Nordic countries (Suhonen, 1994; Djerf-Pierre, 1996; Väliverronen, 1996). Much of the environmental reporting was done by a few interested journalists. Some new environmental editorial positions were established by major newspapers and other media companies during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, environmental issues gained relatively high prominence on the Finnish national public service broadcasting company (YLE) in the 1990s. YLE hosted a weekly news report called Ympäristöuutiset (1992–2002), focusing solely on environmental issues, as well as a consumer-oriented weekly prime-time program called Ekoisti (1993–2001), with a lighter and humoristic touch. Importantly, during 1992–2002, YLE had a special information service focusing on environmental issues and producing material for all editors of the company.

Many of these environmental positions have been terminated since the early 2000s, partly because of financial pressures and staff cutoffs in editorial offices and partly because some media no longer prioritized the expertise of specialized environmental editors. This is a part of the trend of replacing specialized reporters with journalists who cover large areas of news production, including a variety of news topics and different forms of reporting. This development is not without risks. Complicated environmental issues require specific expertise (Sjöberg, 1989; Vahtera, 1993). Overall, the available information suggests that the number of journalists focusing solely on environmental issues has declined or remained stable during the 2000s.

One factor influencing the emergence of environmental concern in the 1960s was the wide penetration of television. Television, together with more advanced photography and printing technologies, shifted the emphasis of media content towards visual forms of communication. This meant that environmental problems with visually appealing photogenic properties were more likely to gain prominence among various news topics. While some acute environmental issues such as oil spills can be highly visual, many of the chronic environmental issues lack easy-to-visualize properties as they are long-term processes rather than sudden local events.

While most scholars agree that the environmental beat in the Nordic mass media started around the 1960s, some environmental stories appeared much earlier. For example, newspapers described the water quality problems and risks caused by emerging new technology – water closets – in Helsinki in the 1870s (Laakkonen, 2001). This serves as a reminder that many of the
present-day environmental debates relating to the human influence on the environment have been around for a long time, but with different framings and labels.

Despite the many similarities, there are differences in the tone, topics, and timing of environmental debates in the Nordic countries. Based on the long-term (1961–1994) coverage of environmental issues in television news reports, Monika Djerf-Pierre (1996) identified three main phases of early environmental reporting in Sweden. The phases included, first, environmental reporting as a mirror in the 1960s, combining a professional ideal of journalism as mirroring societal developments and a technocratic ideal of environmental policy. Second, a period of critical documentation from the early 1970s to the early 1990s emphasized the journalistic ideal of critical scrutiny and was influenced by the demands of environmental pressure groups. Third, the period of popularized environmental reporting started in the early 1990s and was influenced by individualistic lifestyle and consumption-oriented environmental policies as well as increasing commercialization of broadcast news journalism. Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman (2017) note a shift in the environmental debate of Sweden from the value-based and political eco-socialist discourse of the 1980s to the eco-modern discourse in the 1990s emphasizing individual consumer choices and leaving little room for policy controversies.

The key topics of the Swedish environmental agenda have included nature conservation and biocides in the 1960s, industrial pollution in the 1970s, energy debate related to nuclear power and the Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986) accidents, acid rain in the early 1980s, and the environmental impacts of food production and animal treatment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After the millennium, climate change dominated the environmental agenda (Djerf-Pierre, 2012). Generally, environmental reporting has increased, but there have been several peaks of coverage related to events such as environmental accidents and major climate summits.

Pertti Suhonen (1994) has studied environmental reporting in Finland based on the coverage of the most widely read Nordic newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, from 1952–1990. He found that the attention given to environmental issues increased over the decades but there were considerable short-term fluctuations. The environmental reporting of the 1960s was dominated by water pollution issues. Environmental accidents and social controversies related to nature protection raised concerns in the 1970s. The newspaper started a regular section focusing on environmental issues in 1979. This section was first titled “Human and the environment.” Later the section emphasized nature and science issues. During the 1980s, domestic news reporting remained relatively stagnant, while the number of opinion pieces and reports of international environmental issues increased considerably. Global and regional problems such as acid rain and stratospheric ozone depletion, as well as the role of consumers and recycling issues, started to gain more attention.

In 1986 the Chernobyl nuclear accident in the then Soviet Union raised considerable attention and served as an awakening call for Nordic journalists about the importance of environmental issues. The lack of knowledge related to complicated environmental issues was acknowledged and the lack of reliable information from the Soviet Union was criticized. This criticism was relatively mild in Finland compared with the debate in Sweden, reflecting the strong informal influence of the Soviet Union over Finland at the time. Another environmental controversy illustrating the sensitive relationship between the Soviet Union and Finland was the debate over the risk of forest damage and even forest deaths in Finnish Lapland in the late 1980s (Väliverronen, 1996). Potential risks caused by air pollution originating from the large mining and metal industry complexes of the Soviet Union on the Kola Peninsula near Finnish Lapland were intensively discussed by the Finnish media.

Treatment of environmental issues in economic and business media illustrates the development of the field. Satu Tienari (2000) has studied environmental issues in the Finnish weekly
Noora Jokinen (2008) analyzed the environmental coverage of *Kauppalehti*, the most important weekly economic newspaper in Finland. Based on a sample from 1991–1999, the overall amount of environmental coverage remained relatively stable, while the attitudes towards environmental issues shifted from critical or skeptical towards neutral and even concerned. Furthermore, a shift from news-based environmental journalism towards commentary-based journalism occurred, as the share of letters to the editor increased during the study period. Climate issues were brought to the agenda in the mid-1990s.

Overall, the environmental agenda widened in the 1990s as several issues were addressed by the media, including biodiversity and nature protection, water and air quality, the environmental implications of energy production, and climate change. After the millennium, climate change became the most widely discussed issue of the environmental agenda.

**Changing weather: reporting climate change and energy**

Global climate change has been widely acknowledged as the key environmental concern of the early 21st century. To a significant extent, this is due to the high volume of media coverage framing the issue as a societal priority. In many countries, news coverage of climate change has increased since 2005, with intense fluctuations (Schmidt et al., 2013). Nordic countries generally followed this pattern, partly because climate reporting is strongly affected by international news sources such as climate policy negotiations and releases of major international scientific assessments and other research. Focusing on the Swedish climate debate, Anshelm and Hultman (2017, p. 4) go as far as maintaining that, “The year 2006 will forever be remembered as the year when the greenhouse effect was recognized all around the globe as a major crisis in human history.” They emphasize three specific reasons, including the Stern report providing an economic assessment of the costs of climate change, the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the publication of the fourth report on climate change science by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

In the Nordic countries, international news stories are customized or domesticated to correspond with certain nationally based narratives and framings. For example, in comparison with Finland and Norway, press news focusing on international climate summits in Denmark and Sweden has given much more space to civil society actors (Kunelius & Eide, 2012).

Apart from international climate summits and other cosmopolitan news topics, there are various domestic issues that shape the climate agenda in Nordic countries. Weather anomalies are one example. The northern location of the Nordic countries means that instead of hot summer weather, the mild winter weather is more likely to become connected with climate change. In Finland the highest peaks of newspaper coverage of climate change are partly explained by unusually mild and snowless winter weather. Such weather conditions prevailed during one of
the sharpest peaks of the Finnish climate coverage in January 2007. Snowless weather sensitized journalists to report about the risks of warming climate, together with other factors such as fresh international scientific assessments and domestic debate over energy and climate policies (Lyytimäki & Tapio, 2009). Finnish climate coverage began to wane during 2008. After the two mild winters, there was more normal weather during winter 2008–2009. Additionally, the global financial crisis and the economic slowdown began to seriously affect the Finnish economy, reducing public interest in environmental issues. Another explanation for diminishing coverage was climate fatigue following the period of intense debate.

Perhaps the most distinctive peak of climate change coverage occurred simultaneously in several countries during November and December 2009. The high level of coverage was mainly related to the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen. The failure of the summit had a long-lasting effect on climate change communication in the hosting country Denmark. The Danish media had created especially high expectations for the summit, often dramatized with an alarmist vocabulary, and the government had expected the summit to become a cause for national pride. As noted by Mikkel F. Eskjær (2017), the summit was eventually nicknamed as “Flopenhagen” instead of “Hopenhagen.” As a more serious outcome, the intensity of climate reporting by the Danish media has not increased since the sharp drop after the conference, possibly because of frustration created by the failure of the summit and fatigue following the intensive coverage (Eskjær, 2017).

In Finland, the COP15 summit was followed by a dramatic decrease of climate coverage between December 2009 and January 2010, but the coverage has increased more recently (Lyytimäki, 2015). Explanations for the deep drop can be found in the unsuccessful COP15, the continuing economic downturn, and the cold and snowy winter weather in Southern Finland. However, despite the cold weather in Europe and eastern parts of North America, global weather was exceptionally warm in January 2010. This was not highlighted by the domestic press.

The high level of climate coverage during the COP15 summit was partly due to the media treatment of the so-called “Climategate” episode. The leaked private email correspondence of some key climate researchers brought into question the trustworthiness of climate science and the legitimacy of climate negotiations. Contrary to countries such as the US or the UK, Nordic countries’ climate coverage continued to be dominated by views that were favorable to mainstream climate science. In Finland, the mainstream media gave very little space to the so-called climate skeptics. There have been only a handful of journalists and scholars that have publicly questioned the climate consensus as represented by the IPCC. The most notable exception was the TV reportage series called “MOT” by the national broadcasting company YLE. The series aired several episodes mainly based on the views of selected foreign climate skeptics. Instead of criticizing the foundations of climate science, the media debate in Finland has critically addressed potential economic costs and employment effects of climate policies.

In Denmark, climate skepticism questioning the scientific foundations of climate research has been marginal. Controversies have emerged because of the views of Bjorn Lomborg, the author of the book *Skeptical Environmentalist* (Lomborg, 2001). He has questioned the effectiveness of climate policies and the importance of climate policy in relation to other societal problems, but he has not questioned the basic results of climate science.

In Sweden, the climate skeptics have been a small group consisting mainly of elderly men with relatively influential positions in academia or large private companies. Three private liberal-conservative think tanks have supported climate skeptic views and key actors have organized under the so-called Stockholm Initiative in 2008. These climate skeptics have gained some influence on major newspapers through opinion pages (Anshelm & Hultman, 2017, p. 104). Typical
arguments have blamed the media for exaggerating the climate risks, highlighting speculative alarmism, using apocalyptic and religious framings, suppressing “honest” scientists, and silencing dissenting voices. According to these views, mainstream climate science and policy are ruining the economy and climate science is strongly influenced by politics. Skeptics have described themselves as a suppressed, marginalized, and oppressed group. In the Nordic countries the actors voicing skeptic views towards climate consensus as represented by the IPCC have backgrounds in disciplines other than climate sciences. This has seriously undermined their scientific credibility.

In Norway, skeptical views were given more space during the early 2000s, following the journalistic norm of balanced reporting (Ryghaug & Skjølsvold, 2017). Eventually, this raised public debate about the ethics of the media, leading to a decrease in framing that placed mainstream scientists against skeptical dissidents. Generally, the Norwegian debate has been described as ambivalent because of the importance of the petrochemical industry for the national economy and the self-perception of Norway as an environmentally friendly nation. Norway’s reliance on export revenues from the oil and gas industry has created a controversial situation. For example, revenues from the fossil fuel industry have allowed extensive state subsidy programs for electric cars. Instead of outright denial of the existence of anthropogenic climate change, the key form of climate skepticism has been the questioning of the urgency of the climate risks.

The importance of individual opinion leaders can be high in small countries, as indicated by the Lomborg case in Denmark (Eskjær, 2017). In Finland, a turning point in climate debate was the interview of Jorma Ollila, chairman of Nokia Corporation and Royal Dutch Shell. In this interview, he clearly expressed his concern over climate change and urged for strong climate policies. The interview, published at the end of January 2007, intensified climate debate that was already peaking because of unusual weather conditions (Lyytimäki & Tapio, 2009). This unexpectedly strong expression of concern coming from an influential and well-known business leader previously not involved in environmental issues was widely noted and it gave further leverage for advocates of more ambitious climate and energy policy. Likewise, in Sweden the climate debate was strongly influenced by a business celebrity in 2008 when Volvo’s former chairman, Pehr G. Gyllenhammar, strongly questioned the belief in the capability of new eco-friendly technologies to solve climate problems and requested the government to set much more stringent requirements for the industry (Anshelm & Hultman, 2017, p. 54).

Overall, climate change and energy issues have mainly been reported in relation to politics and presented in solution-oriented frames in the Nordic countries. Results of climate science have gained less attention and the views of climate skeptics have been marginal in the national media. There are national differences (Eskjær, 2017; Lyytimäki & Tapio, 2009). In Denmark, the media first treated climate issues under the larger umbrella of sustainability, whereas in Finland, the media first addressed climate change, or global warming, as an isolated environmental issue and later as a broad issue connected to a variety of other issues.

Troubled waters: environmental news of the Baltic Sea

Media coverage about the ecological condition of the Baltic Sea provides an illustrative example of environmental reporting focusing on a geographical area influenced by activities of several nations. The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea adjoining the northeastern Atlantic Ocean. It has a drainage basin hosting about 85 million people in 14 countries. Coastal states include the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, as well as Poland and the Baltic States, Russia, and Germany. The ecological condition of the sea has raised considerable attention in Finland and Sweden, the countries with the longest coastlines. The volume of media attention and
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public and policy awareness has been at a lower level in Russia and Poland, which have been
major sources of pollution. Earlier, during the time preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union,
environmental problems gained some prominence as they provided a seemingly neutral avenue
to criticize the communist regime.

The deteriorating state of the coastal waters near major cities and industrial facilities was
noticed by the press over a century ago (Laakkonen, 2001). Problems were then considered to
be local ones. General environmental concern about the state of the whole sea did not emerge
until the 1960s. Since then, the Baltic Sea has often been described as the most polluted sea in
the world (Tynkkynen, 2017). Such framings represent the sea as plagued by nutrient discharges
resulting in eutrophication and toxic algal blooms, risks of maritime oil transport, harmful sub-
stances, overfishing, and alien species invading the sea. Occasional news reports highlight the
risks of old hazardous industrial and military wastes hiding at the bottom of the sea, and cli-
mate change is increasingly represented as a key long-term threat to the vulnerable northern
ecosystem.

The Baltic Sea is now an intensively studied area surrounded by some of the most environ-
mentally conscious populations in the world. Indeed, the journalists could label the Baltic Sea
as the most protected sea of the world because of a number of activities. The Helsinki Treaty
of 1974 (renewed in 1992) was a pioneer environmental transnational agreement that includes
all coastal countries of the sea. It aims to cover all harmful human impacts affecting the sea.
Successful activities under the treaty include the listing of more than 130 “hot spots” of point
source pollution, most of them already eliminated. The list served as a name-and-shame type of
tool giving journalists a clear topic to report about. Recent activities related to the treaty have
been coordinated under the “Baltic Sea Action Plan” agreed to in 2007 and aiming to reach
an improved ecological status by 2021. Furthermore, environmental policies of the European
Union (EU) have a high relevance since all coastal nations except for Russia are currently mem-
ber states of the EU.

The early environmental media coverage of the Baltic Sea in the 1960s and 1970s focused
mostly on hazardous substances, such as DDT, PCB, and heavy metals. Risks of maritime oil
transport were highlighted even though few major accidents occurred. The most serious case
was the spill from the oil tanker Antonio Gramsci near the highly vulnerable Åland archipelago
in 1979, releasing 5,500 tons of raw oil into the sea. Concerns were raised regarding human
health risks from eating fish. News reporting partly overemphasized the risks since in many
cases the health benefits of fish clearly outweigh the risks, especially since the concentrations
of most harmful substances have decreased considerably during the past decades (Assmuth, 2011).

Declines in the populations of white-tailed eagles and Baltic seals because of hunting and
environmental toxins were highlighted in the early environmental coverage of the Baltic Sea.
More recently, the number of eagles and seals has increased, and counter narratives have evolved.
In particular, seals have been represented as nuisance animals and a threat to the fishing industry
as their numbers have increased considerably. The rapid increase of the number of great cor-
morants is another example of the recent controversies highlighted by environmental reporting.
This fish-eating bird species was heavily hunted in the early 20th century, and it disappeared
from most of the Baltic Sea. Its return has been controversial since the bird colonies heavily
affect the ecosystem of the nesting sites, cause disturbance to humans, and potentially affect
commercially important fish stocks.

Eutrophication and occurrences of blue-green algae have dominated the media coverage of
the Baltic Sea in Finland and Sweden during the past decades (Jönsson, 2011; Lyytimäki, 2012).
In Sweden, overfishing and the risk of depletion of fish stocks also received major attention in
the early 2000s (Djerf-Pierre, 2017). In Finland, overfishing has not been a major topic. The
focus of Swedish reporting shifted to eutrophication in 1988. This was a peak year of reporting with major attention given to the mass death of seal cubs in Kattegat, allegedly caused by algal toxins. In Finland, the turning point of reporting was 1997 when massive occurrences of blue-green algae hit coastal and inland waters. The Gulf of Finland was seriously affected.

Algal occurrences are a highly visual phenomenon providing easy-to-use material to television, online, and print communication. Photographs of algae can be visually impressive, and on a personal level they are easy to connect with activities such as swimming, drinking, and other uses of water. Research suggests potential health hazards related to the toxins produced by some blue-green (cyanobacteria) algae species. High news appeal also is related to the timing of algal occurrences. Blue-green algae typically emerge during the summer holidays, when people spend their leisure time on the beaches. Therefore, people have a high personal interest in the algae situation. This also creates demand for news coverage about the water environment. In addition, during the holiday season, there is a relatively short supply of other domestic news issues.

In Finland, an additional factor is the increased supply of information provided by the national algal monitoring and communication system. The need for additional communication was recognized after the algal occurrences of summer 1997. The communication system by various authorities has provided the media with map-based information on the algal situation, press releases, and other material. A special web portal concentrating on the Baltic Sea was established in 2002, and later the main channel of communication has been a wiki-based platform allowing and encouraging wide-based citizen participation.

Currently, phosphorus and nitrogen discharges from the use of fertilizers in agriculture are framed as the key problem of the sea by the media. Economic subsidies for eco-friendly farming and political restrictions on agriculture are often presented as a solution. In Finland, the public recognition of the impacts of agriculture was delayed because of the difficulty in reliably assessing the non-point discharges from agricultural areas and because of cultural and political reasons (Hildén, Jokinen, & Aakkula, 2012). Agriculture in Finland has been based on small-scale family-owned farms that were not considered as major polluters. Because of late urbanization, a significant number of people have personal ties to the countryside.

One difference between Sweden and Finland is that the public debate in Sweden more often connects the ecological issues of the sea with international policy issues. This is evident with the debates over the Nord Stream gas pipelines connecting Russia with Germany via the Baltic Sea. The plans for the first pipeline were discussed from 2006 onwards, and the pipeline was completed in 2011. Plans for the second pipeline were launched in 2015. In Sweden, the planned pipelines have received considerable attention, and they have been framed mainly as a policy issue with potential military and safety implications and as an environmental issue. In Finland, the plans for pipelines have been framed predominantly as an environmental issue with some attention to economic and policy implications. The difference reflects the different positions of the governments and different economic priorities affecting environmental reporting.

The future of environmental journalism in the Nordic nations

Nordic environmental journalism has been under constant change during its half-century history. Topics of reporting have changed, and the intensity of coverage has fluctuated. Peaks of coverage have been caused both by domestic and international factors. Domestic factors range from specific ecological processes of the northern environment, such as summertime algal blooming or missing wintertime snow cover, to local environmental disputes and national policy debates. International news topics such as major climate summits have received a relatively high visibility,
partly because the Nordic countries, as open small economies, are highly dependent on international developments.

Partly because of research showing the cross-national characteristics of environmental problems, the focus of environmental journalism has shifted from tangible local environmental problems towards wider and more obscure concerns. The rise of global climate change as the most widely discussed environmental topic of the early 21st century is an illustrative example. Coverage of international climate news is often domesticated and adjusted to local contexts in different ways, reflecting differences in national policy priorities and the energy palettes of the Nordic countries. What is common is that climate issues have been more or less mainstreamed as routine concerns to be considered in various arenas. This may leave more room for the emergence of new and more focused environmental topics, as shown by increasing concern for the environmental risks associated with plastic litter.

In addition to the changing topics of reporting, the professional practices of environmental journalism are under constant change. The importance of information producers and knowledge brokers such as environmental non-governmental organizations, industry organizations defending their interests, think tanks with different backgrounds, and research institutions promoting their own environmental research has increased during the past decades. At the same time, the resources available for high-quality independent journalistic work focusing on environmental issues have not increased, at least if measured by the number of journalists focusing solely on environmental issues. Journalists hired by media companies often lack the time to focus on a single topic such as a certain environmental issue. At the same time, the widening scope of environmental concerns poses new challenges for journalists. This might create opportunities for freelance journalists specializing in environmental issues and capable of providing in-depth perspectives. However, according to the chairperson of the Finnish Environmental Journalists Association, Pekka Virtanen (2018), “Freelance journalists focusing on environmental issues have plenty of topics to cover but they face increasing difficulties to find editorial offices willing to pay for their in-depth coverage.”

Some scholars say the problem is “cut-and-paste” journalism, emphasizing the increased and uncritical use of press releases and other PR material and the less active role of journalists (Juntunen, 2011). However, others have emphasized the more active role of information providers as an opportunity for science-based reporting (Lyytimäki et al., 2013). High public trust towards research institutes and authorities in the Nordic countries, together with high education levels and environmental awareness, provide some cause for optimism. Furthermore, the Nordic traditions of transparency of administration, wide availability of public documents, and reliable long-term statistical data describing societal trends provide opportunities for fact checking.

Rapid technological development is a key question for all journalism. Nordic countries have been at the forefront of adoption of new information and communication technologies, but the implications for environmental journalism are highly uncertain.

Environmental journalism is a public good that is increasingly difficult to fund on a commercial basis (Allern & Pollack, 2017). A crucial issue in the Nordic context is the strong but gradually weakening role of public service broadcasting. Rapid technological change combined with budget austerity is a difficult challenge.

It can be argued that because of the staff cutoffs in news offices, the structure of the field of environmental journalism in the Nordic countries now resembles the situation that prevailed prior to the 1990s when there were very few journalists covering environmental issues full-time. However, a key difference is that environmental awareness is now much wider, both among the public and the journalists themselves. Environmental issues are now established among the regularly and even routinely reported topics of the news agenda. The Nordic countries perform
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well in environmental rankings, but they have lots of room for further improvement (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2018). Virtanen (2018) notes that future environmental journalists must be able to answer the multiple challenges of presenting the key messages swiftly and succinctly while also incorporating increasing diversity of results from different disciplines and viewpoints by a variety of stakeholders. Critical and independent journalistic work is still needed.

Acknowledgements

Warm thanks to Mr. Pekka Virtanen for providing important insights and to Academy of Finland (297748, 325207) for providing funding.

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