

Citizens' news use during Covid-19

Concerns about misinformation and reliance on local news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden

Brita Ytre-Arne & Hallvard Moe

Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This chapter analyses how citizens in four Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, where news from various sources mixed with abundant information across digital platforms. In response to concerns about false and misleading information in a public health crisis, we ask to which degree Nordic citizens worried about being misinformed regarding Covid-19, and how they evaluated the trustworthiness of pandemic news. In the context of a global crisis affecting everyday life, we ask how people relied on local news for information specifically relevant to their situation. To answer our research questions, we draw on comparative survey data from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, combined with qualitative in-depth interviews on pandemic news experiences in Norway. Our analysis contributes with a contextualised understanding of pandemic news use in the Nordics, emphasising the relevance of societal structures of high trust and extensive news provision.

Keywords: news use, misinformation, local news, trust, qualitative interviews, survey

Introduction

In a digital media environment with abundant information, how do people seek information when a major societal crisis occurs, one that affects people's daily lives in local communities as well as occupying national and global news

Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2023). Citizens' news use during Covid-19: Concerns about misinformation and reliance on local news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a pandemic: Crisis management and Covid-19 in the Nordic countries* (pp. 303–324). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855688-14>

agendas? In this chapter, we analyse how citizens in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden followed the Covid-19 pandemic, asking how people navigated news sources for trustworthy and relevant information. We investigate the central role of the news media in this regard, but consider news as interwoven with social media, digital platforms, and various kinds of information in a hybrid media environment. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated problems of information overload (de Bruin et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) as well as worries about the extent and consequences of digital misinformation (Damstra et al., 2021), expressing some of the ways in which the pandemic constituted a “critical moment” for journalism (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

At the outset of an intense crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns for misinformation are likely to abound (Damstra et al., 2021). This was evident in early 2020 as the World Health Organization warned the world not only of the pandemic, but also of an “infodemic” of too much information – both accurate and false – making it hard for people to find “trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (WHO, 2020: 2). The term infodemic has since been criticised for being oversimplified and harmful, conflating problems of deception and abundance and inadequately portraying reception as infection (Simon & Camargo, 2021). Research into so-called fake news underlines the need for deeper understandings of how this phenomenon is experienced by audiences, in the context of their lives and broader information practices (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019).

Instead of assuming that misinformation is an excessive problem amplified during crisis, we ask how people in the Nordics actually navigated their information environments during the Covid-19 pandemic, looking for what the World Health Organization also considered necessary: relevant and trustworthy guidance. Our premise is that citizens’ everyday media use constitutes a fundamental backdrop for understanding societal resilience and crisis communication, as people are prone to turn to media sources they find relevant and with which they had established relationships before the crisis (Odén et al., 2016). This implies that more knowledge is needed on how ordinary citizens find and interpret information in their daily lives – and that societal context is crucial.

We particularly highlight the extensive proliferation of digital media technologies, as well as the dependable access to local and regional news media, as presumably relevant factors in people’s information practices during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries. We are particularly interested in the role of local news, but consider that “news” – here meaning the provision of journalistic media – in practice mixes with information from other sources, ranging from employers and government bodies to activists and acquaintances. Pandemic news has partly focused on information also disseminated elsewhere, such as infection rates provided by health authorities and tracking sites, or countermeasures that are also the topic of press briefings and institutional guid-

ance. Examining the role of the local news media – while presumably mixed with other information sources – is particularly relevant for understanding how people sought information about the pandemic as a crisis affecting their daily lives in the places where they live, bringing concerns of the global health crisis into Nordic societies and their everyday lives.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse how people in the Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic for information they perceived as trustworthy and relevant to their situation. We raise two research questions:

- RQ1. To which degree were Nordic citizens concerned about pandemic disinformation, and how did they evaluate trustworthiness?
- RQ2. What was the role of local news in providing Nordic citizens with information about the Covid-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, we draw on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. We use Nordic country data from the comparative *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021) survey (which included Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) to provide an overview of how citizens perceived threats of misinformation and usage of local news. Further, we draw on a qualitative in-depth interview study with Norwegian news users – conducted in late 2020, in which twelve informants recounted their pandemic news experiences – to delve deeper into perceptions of trustworthiness and relevance.

Our findings shed new light on the complicated relationship between personal experience, information abundance, and crisis communication to citizens, and they untangle some aspects of how the Nordic news media informed citizens about Covid-19. We emphasise reliance on local media for pandemic information relevant to daily life, and we discuss how Nordic citizens appear slightly less concerned about exposure to digital misinformation than most other Europeans, and what this might mean. From our qualitative analysis, we emphasise how assessments of risk and personal relevance are key to pandemic news experiences in a situation of overall high levels of trust in the media. These findings point to how key features of established media systems, but also social systems more broadly, come into play in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature review: Pandemic news use and the Nordic context

The research literature on news use is substantial, and a key concern over the past decade has been to investigate what an increasingly fragmented, hyper-connected digital information environment means for news users (Bengtsson

& Johansson, 2020; Elvestad & Phillips, 2018; Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2020). News items are dispersed across a proliferation of interconnected digital media platforms, mixed with other forms of communication, while users' attention and time remain limited commodities (Aharoni et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018; Ørmen, 2016). Acute crisis situations can, at least temporarily, uproot established practices and lead to more intense information-gathering, for which citizens depend on the media not just for updates on unfolding events, but also for sense-making and understanding (Lowrey, 2004; Moe et al., 2019; Westlund & Ghersetti, 2015). As also indicated by experimental crisis communication research into information-seeking behaviours, audiences combine a multitude of different media in crisis situations, while overload is an observed problem (Austin et al., 2012; Jin et al., 2016). The role of the news media remains central, and established everyday media habits continue to be important to predicting where Nordic citizens turn for information during a crisis (Odén et al., 2016). Across these studies, social media are found to be increasingly relevant for young people – as opposed to legacy media for older age groups – and preconceived notions of trust and credibility are found to be part of news navigation.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, several studies have documented what appears to be a widely shared pattern: News use increased drastically in March 2020 as the first wave of Covid-19 infections spread globally and several countries went into lockdown, but then it soon decreased and eventually formed a more complicated, long-term pattern of use, with differentiated user patterns and problems of information overload. Such findings have been reported in the UK (Kleis Nielsen et al., 2020), in various countries in Eastern Europe (Mihelj et al., 2021), in Belgium (Vandenplas et al., 2021), in the Netherlands (de Bruin et al., 2021; Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2022), and in Australia (Mannell & Meese, 2022). This pattern is also supported by comparative analyses building on survey data conducted before and after the early pandemic waves (Newman et al., 2020, 2021). Some studies specifically investigated the restructuring of news habits during the Covid-19 pandemic with quantitative and qualitative methods, indicating that an interplay of contextual and individual factors shape long-term pandemic news use (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2021). The comparative study by Van Aelst and colleagues (2021) investigated the relationship between established trust in the media and increased use of legacy media, while both point to differences in being personally affected by the pandemic as important to explaining news habits. Similar to strong but short-lived rally-around-the-flag effects found in public opinion studies (Johansson et al., 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 13), research on pandemic news use has already documented that the early spike was followed by more complicated patterns building on differentiated societal contexts and user practices.

Looking more specifically at the Nordic countries, pre-pandemic news use patterns were characterised by a proliferation of digital technologies, high levels of societal trust, and continued use of legacy media (e.g., Newman et al., 2020). The Nordic societies can be described as media welfare states, with characteristics such as well-respected freedom of the press; a robust self-regulatory regime; proactive state support at an arm’s-length distance for a private, commercial press; and partly with a diverse structure of providers with universal appeal and high levels of consumption as a result (Syvertsen et al., 2014). These high consumption levels should also be understood in the context of the Nordic societies’ historically “comparative homogeneity, wealth, and egalitarian social structure” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 25). While one could argue that the Nordic countries are similar enough to be lumped together, one can always zoom in to look for differences. The argument for a Nordic model must be empirically grounded, and we should be careful not to overstate uniqueness compared with other societies.

We can synthesise from the state of the research field that news use does change during a crisis, but that this change intersects with patterns and practices – and societal structures – established beforehand. For the Nordics, we can assume that key characteristics such as trust, digitalisation, and comparatively strong legacy news media will be important to news use in a pandemic crisis. A Nordic report on news media during the Covid-19 pandemic found a shared tendency of increased interest in legacy media content and accelerated digital transformation (Ohlsson et al., 2021). In Sweden, reports have found stable trust in news media as a societal institution during the pandemic, but also some patterns of decreasing trust, particularly regarding local morning newspapers – potentially ascribed to reactions to paywalled content (Andersson, 2021). Regarding qualitative studies on pandemic news use in the Nordic countries, our qualitative work in Norway has analysed the early lockdown news spike through the lens of “doomscrolling” (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). These studies investigated some aspects of how citizens have sought to manage in the uncertain and complex information environment of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter contributes by combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore how Nordic citizens sought trustworthy and locally relevant information.

Methods: Quantitative patterns and qualitative news experiences

Our quantitative analysis is based on data from the *Retuers Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021). The survey was conducted with national partners across and beyond Europe, and the data collection was conducted by YouGov with an online questionnaire in early 2021. Denmark,

Finland, Norway, and Sweden were included along with almost 40 other countries in Europe and worldwide (Iceland was not included in the survey).

The samples are based on self-recruited panels, where respondents were invited to participate measured against quotas based on age, gender, and region (see Moe, 2019; Eastbury, 2022). An advantage of using panels is the high motivation levels among the respondents; a disadvantage is that the samples are prone to biases, since certain types of people are more likely to volunteer for inclusion and longevity in such panels. While this is a challenge shared by everyone studying humans, the panel structure does potentially amplify the challenge. In the present survey, this challenge is mitigated through the sampling as well as through weighting (Eastbury, 2022). Earlier tests, conducted, for example, by Strabac and Aalberg (2011), showed only marginal differences between the answers given by telephone respondents and by online panel participants on issues of news knowledge and related questions. Still, the limitation is an important issue to raise, especially when comparing datasets across societal settings.

Importantly, the samples in the Reuters datasets only reflect the population in each country that has access to the Internet, typically disfavours less affluent or older segments of the population, as well as those with low levels of formal education. For some of the countries in the general study, this is a major problem, though it is less of a problem for the four Nordic countries due to the very high levels of Internet penetration: 98 per cent for Denmark and Norway, 96 per cent for Sweden, and 94 per cent for Finland (the data have been weighted) (Newman et al., 2021). While in previous years the survey has filtered out those who do not use news at certain regular intervals, the 2021 data includes all respondents.

Selected variables from the dataset focus on experiences with news use during the Covid-19 pandemic – especially pandemic-related news and information – and provide a basic overview of some key characteristics of news use amongst Nordic citizens during the pandemic. Concerning the first research question, the survey tackles experience with misinformation with statements and questions that avoid the term fake news. The survey first probes general concern with the occurrence of untrustworthy information online, and then asks for respondents' own experiences encountering misleading information related to a range of topics, including Covid-19. Second, regarding local news, respondents were invited to think about using local information in general, and then relate that to different topics – including a follow-up on Covid-19 – and through which media such local information was accessed. It should be noted that the survey focused on modes of news use (e.g., brands, devices, formats) and did not include specific questions on, for example, national news or types of news content that could be directly compared with attention to local information and news.

We are interested both in how the Nordic countries stand apart from other countries and in how the Nordic countries differ compared with each other. We include, for the sake of comparison, figures from contrasting cases: the US and the UK, as well-researched cases whose media systems and political systems have features far different from what is found in the Nordics (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004); Hungary, as a European state which has recently experienced a strong tendency towards authoritarianism (Bajomi-Lazar, 2017); and the Netherlands and Germany, as European countries thought to be more similar to the Nordics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

As our analysis demonstrates, there are considerable similarities between the Nordic countries included in the Reuters survey, enabling us to draw on a single-country study for qualitative insights that might illustrate some of the themes we emphasise. We utilise here an in-depth interview study on pandemic news experiences, conducted in Norway in November and December 2020, a point in time that constituted a second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the capital Oslo most severely affected. The informants who were interviewed included men and women of different age groups and occupations and with different pandemic experiences. They were recruited from a broader sample who had replied to a qualitative questionnaire during the first lockdown in early 2020 (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). In the interviews, informants were asked to narrate and reflect upon their pandemic news experiences, from first hearing of Covid-19 until the point of the interview in late 2020. Questions further explored risk perceptions, information practices, and interpretations of news in different stages of the pandemic. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian and excerpts quoted in the chapter have been translated by the authors. The interviews were analysed by creating analytical portraits of each informant, including their media repertoires (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012) and their personal pandemic experience, as well as a thematic analysis across interviews to follow up on particularly striking findings, such as a preoccupation with monitoring infection rates (Dahl & Ytre-Arne, 2021).

In the following analysis, we answer the research questions on navigating news sources for trustworthy and locally relevant information, building on both quantitative and qualitative data for each. We first take a closer look at how people attempted to filter out misinformation and assess which sources were credible, and next, we analyse the role of local news in changing everyday situations. For both these themes, we discuss the meaning of the Nordic context.

Nordic patterns: Misinformation and trustworthy sources

An overarching finding in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* is that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated or exacerbated previously noted tendencies in the transformation to a digital and increasingly platform-driven news

environment (Newman et al., 2021), including a continued decline in print, and increase in online, news. People turned to a wide array of sources of news and information, of which live television and online news were particularly adaptable to reduced mobility and a more homebound daily life.

The 2021 data also highlights increased levels of trust in news and a stronger reliance on trusted and well-established news providers – at least in countries with strong and independent public service media (Newman et al., 2021). The Nordic countries fit such descriptions well, with Finnish respondents reporting the overall highest levels of general trust in the news, and with providers such as the Norwegian newspaper *VG* excelling in terms of trust levels. One way to proceed from such general findings is to look at the concern about misinformation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 14.1 compares the Nordic population with those in a selection of similar and different media systems in terms of their level of concern about fake news on the Internet. Respondents from the Nordics do not stand apart here – at least not in unison – when it comes to the general worry about fake or misleading information online.

Table 14.1 *Concern about misinformation on the Internet in connection with the news (per cent)*

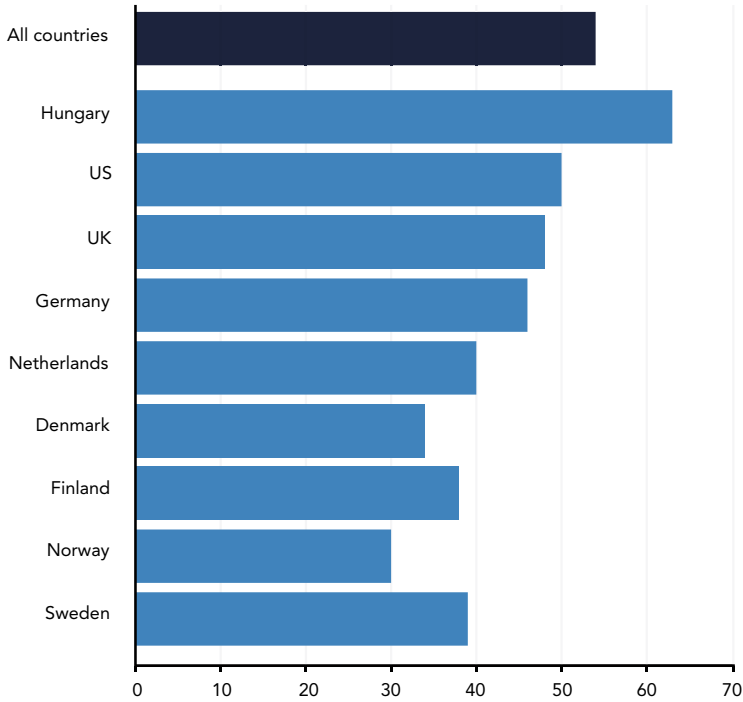
	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Agree	58	56	64	66	37	40	40	60	45	51
Disagree	14	13	12	11	23	18	15	14	20	18

Comments: Survey question: “Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet”. Answers were given on a 1–5 scale. The table shows results of “Strongly/partly agree” versus “Strongly/partly disagree”; thus, neutral answers are excluded. N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

As shown by Table 14.1, Finns are slightly more worried than the overall average in the survey, and significantly more so than Danes. Germans are less worried than any of the Nordics on an aggregated level. The high levels of concern in the US and the UK might be related to the attention given to allegations of fake news, linked to political populism and polarised public debate. Hungary, a media system where editorial freedom is challenged, might also provide fertile ground for concerns about misinformation, while the reasons why Finns are equally concerned are more difficult to determine. Moving from expressions of worry to actual experiences might bring us closer to an understanding. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we can look at people’s experiences of false or misleading information about Covid-19. Here, a somewhat different picture emerges.

Figure 14.1 Experience with encountering misleading or false information about Covid-19 (per cent)



Comments: Survey question: "Have you seen false or misleading information about any of the following topics, in the last week?" N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

Figure 14.1 shows overall lower levels across the Nordic region, when compared both with countries having different media systems (US and UK, but also Hungary), as well as more similar systems (Germany and the Netherlands). The number of respondents who reported having experienced misinformation is lower in the Nordic countries, and particularly low in Norway. As such, it seems as if people in the Nordic region do worry about false and misleading information (especially Finland), as people do elsewhere, but they have not experienced it to the same degree in their own pandemic-related information environment.

Looking closer at which sources people might have in mind when it comes to digital misinformation, we can observe how patterns of trust and distrust established *before* the pandemic have considerable relevance in this specific context as well. Table 14.2 lists several actors who could potentially be sources of misinformation.

Table 14.2 *Expected sources of misleading information about Covid-19 online (per cent)*

	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Government, politicians/political parties in my country	29	41	33	19	19	17	13	18	10	16
Foreign governments, politicians/political parties	9	5	7	5	7	6	7	11	10	8
Ordinary people	16	13	13	17	10	10	15	17	14	18
Activists/-groups	15	10	10	25	31	37	30	20	26	22
Celebrities	6	3	5	6	8	9	7	9	10	5
Journalists/news org	11	12	13	10	6	7	6	7	9	8
Not concerned about any of these	7	7	7	9	9	5	10	8	12	11
Don't know	8	8	12	10	10	9	12	9	10	12

Comments: Survey question: “Thinking specifically about coronavirus (Covid-19) and its effects, which of the following sources, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information from...”. N: All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005. Totals do not always sum up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

One key dividing line is between individuals and state or institutionalised political actors. While Hungarians – living with weaker independent media and with pressures against freedom of expression – worry the most about their own political institutions, Nordic respondents clearly point to activists as the main culprits. The terms “activist” or “activist group” are, of course, open to interpretation, but can in this context be presumed to include, for instance, vaccination sceptics or conspiracy theory advocates. Journalists and news organisations are identified by a small minority across the Nordic countries as potential spreaders of misinformation.

Overall, the Nordic patterns in terms of fear of misinformation about Covid-19 appears to be in line with the high levels of societal trust – including trust in politicians, authorities, and legacy media – present in the Nordic countries. We now turn to our qualitative interview study from Norway to delve deeper into what trust in news could mean during the Covid-19 pandemic.

News experiences: Trust and alignment of risk perceptions

In our qualitative interview material, we also found expressions of how the unusual pandemic situation intersected with formerly established attitudes and beliefs about whom to trust for news, as people tried to orient themselves in the abundance of Covid-19 information. Such orientations started from previously established media repertoires, although the meaning of these shifted as people felt that their daily lives, and society in general, was changing. The temporality of the Covid-19 crisis matters considerably to news experiences: Our in-depth interviews were conducted in late 2020, a time of second-infection waves, new lockdowns, increasing fatigue – and yet no vaccines. Informants tended to reflect upon their information practices during the early phase of lockdown as a distinct period (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) after which they developed information strategies that were less consuming of their time and attention, but that still needed to include the most relevant pandemic news.

Regarding trust, our qualitative study portrays a complex picture. Some informants spoke about how they evaluated the trustworthiness of Covid-19 information, assessed the credibility of different sources, and which kinds of news they disliked or felt that others could be scared of or fooled by. Such considerations appeared to be part of a shared mode of interpretation, although there were individual differences in which media or sources people singled out as trustworthy or problematic. However, in addition to these relatively specific discussions of trustworthiness, informants expressed concern about whether news media could be trusted to adequately communicate the appropriate level of gravity regarding the pandemic as a societal crisis. They talked about their feelings of being in or out of sync with the overall risk perception conveyed through the news, with some criticising what they found to be sensationalist exaggerations, and others arguing that the media had been too slow in understanding the extent of the crisis. Below, we look at some examples of what such navigation could mean to different informants.

Erik, a consultant in his 30s, described himself in his interview as very critical towards so-called mainstream media, which he found to be filled with click-bait and barely hidden commercial agendas. His media repertoire included gaming and entertainment streaming services and a variety of news outlets – from the public service broadcaster NRK to alternative right-wing media – although he also distanced himself from some of these. He explained that he was not necessarily looking for news he agreed with, but that he wanted journalism to be more precise in referencing sources and relying on science. He claimed to prefer *expert* knowledge: He wanted the news to communicate more directly what experts were saying – to reference reports and scientific recommendations – whether the topic was climate change or the pandemic. This made him sceptical towards having news disseminated through journalists: “A random guy, I don’t

even know what he does or his education level, he writes ‘this is how it is’... I feel that is the case with a lot with the major news actors”. During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, Erik felt that the media – for once – got things right:

In this one instance, they are correct that this is actually dangerous. There are new things all the time of course... bird flu, swine flu, butter shortage crisis, it’s always something, but this time they were right – this thing is dangerous. One should not shrug at it, should not trust them less this time. I don’t feel they have had any reason for having an agenda, because when people are scared they buy newspapers and consume lots and lots of media. The media can just spread the truth now, spread what is really happening, and actually make a profit.

There was also a personal side to Erik’s assessments of Covid-19 as dangerous: He described a strong emotional reaction to a news reportage from a market in Wuhan in early 2020, feeling shocked by the conditions and fearing the repercussions. Then, he was infected himself, as one of the first confirmed cases in his small town, which led him to spend a long time in isolation with his partner and child. He described the experience as “surreal”, as he was feeling fairly well but still isolating strictly, according to the belief that “if I leave the house, other people could die”. In that early phase, he relied on direct contact with local health authorities to find out what the regulations were, for instance, whether his partner could take their child outside. He did not trust information transmitted through social media or local news – he preferred to hear directly from the experts. After recovering, Erik experienced his personal situation during the pandemic as good: working from home, taking care of his family, and gaming with friends.

Erik’s story shows how preformed trust and distrust in the media, as well as previously established media habits and source credibility assessments, all played into his pandemic news experience. However, the meanings and conditions of trust changed with the feeling of living in a real-life, and not a media-enhanced, crisis: Suddenly, he found that scary headlines were actually called for and that the expert knowledge he espoused received a more prominent place on the news agenda. Mainstream media could be trusted insofar as their commercialised interests, as he conceived them, now aligned with his own, making him appear more in sync with his information environment.

Another informant is Susanne, a woman in her 40s who worked in communication and became unemployed when the Covid-19 pandemic began. In her interview, she described how this situation led her to use media to regulate her moods and activities: Suddenly, she had a lot of time on her hands, and she spent it on podcasts, international news, and documentaries, seeking to feel engaged and updated but not dragged down into gloom and doom. She provided the following account of evolving pandemic news experiences:

There are phases. In the beginning the exposure... in any crisis, you breathe and live within the news, all the time. Updates cannot come fast enough. You can't have too many sources, you get paralysed from thinking about other things. [...] I have worked in some international settings, and that is kind of a correction – to see the scope, the big picture. You become really oriented towards the outside, but it is about knowing where you belong, how to navigate. When things became less dense... then I suddenly avoided debate programmes, I would rather read an article... I did not need opinions because I had my opinion, you know? And then you just need to correct that once in a while. Tap in to see that “ok, I am still on track”.

Like Erik, Susanne appeared concerned with overall perceptions of the pandemic, although she appeared more flexible in negotiating her opinions in relation to the news. While Susanne's news habits and societal views appear different from Erik's, she expressed many similar points of criticism towards the news media, for instance, a dislike for media personalities that she felt received too much attention. As the pandemic went on, she said, she developed an increased awareness of interpreting what she described as people's “positions”. Here, she mentioned differences between the pandemic strategies of Norway and Sweden as an example:

I have many friends in Sweden – people who are usually not afraid of speaking out on controversial issues. [...] First they were quiet, or gave just positive news, for instance, posting articles from *The New York Times* praising Sweden. If I talked to them, they found me extreme for shutting things down, while they were supporting Tegnell so much they could have him tattooed on their chests, you know? But now, there are some small signs... More people are ill, and they are realising this is a really shitty situation. Now they are critical, although in a low-voiced deliberative Swedish way. [...] So yes, I am concerned with where people *stand*.

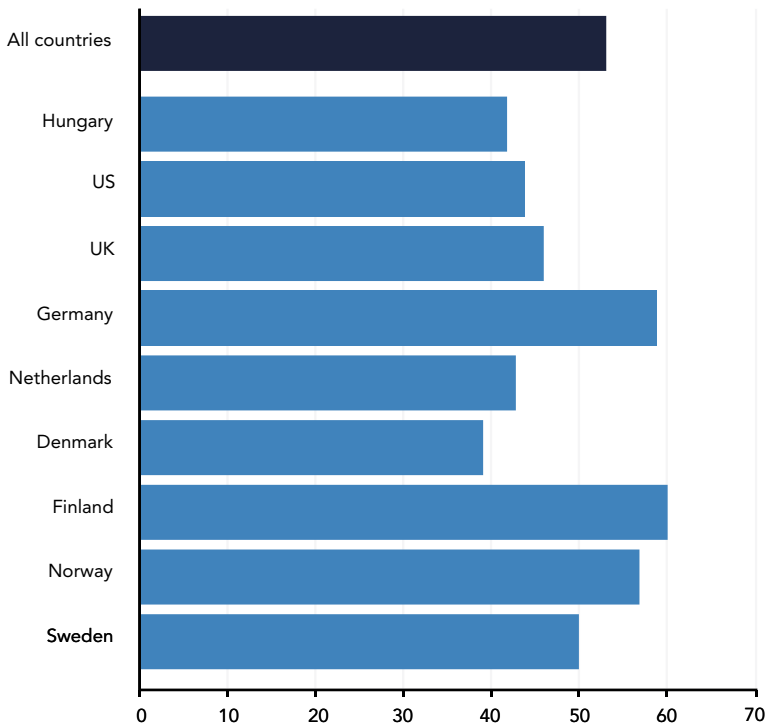
Regarding the navigation for trustworthy information, it is important to highlight that our interview material conveys media criticism, not blatant distrust. Our informants did not accuse Nordic news media – nor politicians or health authorities – of deliberately disseminating misinformation or hiding important aspects of the pandemic from the public. Instead, much of the media critique referred to themes and tropes not specific to Covid-19, such as criticism of click-bait or preferences for news outlets deemed to be “balanced”. A particular theme that seemed heavily accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, however, was risk alignment as part of considerations of trust. People appeared more comfortable in their information environment if they could trust that the news conveyed an overall opinion on the pandemic that corresponded to their own views, formed partly by news and partly by personal experiences.

Nordic patterns: The importance of local news

Our second research question investigates the role of local news in Nordic citizens' informational practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. As noted, research has demonstrated an increase in general news use during the pandemic. We presume here that a pandemic – by definition, a global event – will nevertheless turn people's attention towards how their own communities are affected, and that local news could play a role in this regard.

Though we do not have directly comparable data on respondents' attention to national or international news and information, we would argue that our presumption is substantiated by the survey data shown in Figure 14.2.

Figure 14.2 Use of local information about the pandemic (per cent)



Comments: Survey question: "Thinking about local news and information, which of the following topics have you accessed in the last week? Please select all that apply". *N:* All countries = 92,372; Hungary = 2,032; US = 2,009; UK = 2,039; Germany = 2,011; Netherlands = 2,006; Denmark = 2,005; Finland = 2,009; Norway = 2,010; Sweden = 2,005.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

When asked about what kind of local information people had accessed across all countries included in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, a majority claimed to have received local information about Covid-19 or other health-related news. This was the most accessed category of local news and information – ranking above politics, sports, jobs, and crime. For each of the selected countries, the pandemic is also the most popular category, except local weather. This testifies to the ever-present importance of the pandemic during the period of data collection, but also to the relevance of information directly related to everyday life. But there are differences between countries, also within the Nordic region: Danish respondents stand apart, as only 39 per cent received this kind of local information – lower than the average of all countries, as well as lower than in much larger individual countries (US) and countries with different media systems. Geography and demography might be important here, with Denmark being a small country with, perhaps, less tendency to differentiate between localities on the topic. By comparison, Norway is also small, but with a more dispersed population. Another possible source of such differences could lie in the media systems. If we look at the role of local news providers as a component of people’s repertoire for information sources about the pandemic, we can perhaps get a better understanding of differences between the Nordic countries.

Table 14.3 Selected preferred sources for information about Covid-19 and other health-related news (per cent)

	All countries	Hungary	US	UK	Germany	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Local newspaper/freesheet or websites	19	20	15	17	32	41	37	44	53	39
Local TV or websites	22	10	39	22	17	16	17	9	8	14
Local radio or websites	9	8	6	8	14	6	5	7	3	9
Social media	14	31	7	11	5	5	12	10	7	7
Search engines	14	9	9	13	8	9	8	7	4	6
Other sites or apps	7	5	11	13	10	0	3	7	2	4

Comments: Survey question: “You said you have accessed local news and information about the following topic in the last week... Which source offers the best information for you on this topic? Please select just one option”. N: All countries = 40,3016; Hungary = 844; US = 882; UK = 929; Germany = 1,183; Netherlands = 864; Denmark = 779; Finland = 1,209; Norway = 1,144; Sweden = 1,001.

Source: Newman et al., 2021

Table 14.3 accentuates how different societal settings influence the selection of sources. In countries with a strong local media provision, these appear as the most preferred source for a larger portion of the respondents. In the US – a large country with established local broadcasting networks – local television is mentioned more often than elsewhere. In the Nordic countries with strong local newspapers, such as Norway, these are pointed to significantly more often. Again, the differences within the Nordic region are also noteworthy here, with Danes appearing to rely more on social media and less on local news providers. It is reasonable to interpret this finding as following the path laid by the Danish newspaper business's development, which is marked by fewer local subscription-based actors compared with its northern neighbours, more prolific regional and national outlets, and a comparatively early development of a freesheet industry (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2014). The contrast is most clear when compared with Norway. The question, then, is how this general pattern is reflected in the everyday news experiences of people in Norway.

News experiences: Relevance to daily life in the pandemic

We now follow up on the question regarding locally relevant information by returning to the qualitative interview study from Norway, conducted at a time when people had lived with the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic for a while. The intense and wide-reaching information gathering of the first lockdown phase had subsided, while people continued to follow the situation with a more focused notion of personally situated relevance. Our sample included informants who had migrated to Norway or lived abroad before the pandemic, and who continued to follow local developments in places they had personal connections to. In addition, they followed local information in the place they then lived, as did the rest of the sample of informants. The reduced mobility characteristic of the Covid-19 pandemic thus implied an increased orientation towards the communities in which one was located: one's temporary or permanent notions of home.

When discussing different forms of Covid-19 news, our informants talked about looking for specific information needed to proceed with life through a time of shifting restrictions and fluctuating infection rates. This could entail monitoring daily infection numbers, relying on information directly from employers or local communities, or checking in with news perceived to have direct impact on daily choices and personal areas of interest. Local news remained important for its informational qualities, supplemented by municipality websites or workplace or sector information channels. Some people changed their media habits, while others continued as before, but with a partly different experience of what relevant news meant to them.

One example is Einar, a cultural sector event worker in his 30s with high interest in news and politics. His media repertoire consisted of mixed podcasts, newspapers, and social media, with regular attention to public service news on various platforms. As his work situation was constantly affected by shifting pandemic restrictions for public events throughout 2020, Einar reflected upon his pandemic news experience:

The difference is just that I have been sitting at home working, but the way I have followed the media is more or less the same. I might feel like I do it more often, or that more is at stake, but I actually think I followed the media just as much before, just that it did not feel as close to me.

For Einar, the practical day-to-day routine of his job was suddenly a public matter, subject to medical advice, political decisions, and journalistic coverage. He relied on a variety of monitorial practices to figure out what would happen, both practically and regarding the future outlook of his line of work.

Karla, a mother of two who worked in education, describes a similar experience of searching for specific information on how to conduct her daily life: “It [news use] has normalised. Now it is more about catching the latest: what are the rules now?” Her experience of the pandemic was shaped by the shock of suddenly experiencing schools going into lockdown in March 2020, impacting both her work and her family life. In early lockdown, she followed news more closely, for instance, by watching evening news on television, which she would normally never do, as her pre-pandemic media repertoire had been centred on the smartphone and quick updates between activities:

In the beginning, you wondered how dangerous it was, how... anything you could find. And eventually it was more like... “how are we to interpret these rules?” I have two children – who can they hang out with? What is acceptable? [...] Well, really, [I looked for] anything about organising their day in the best possible way.

While locally relevant information was essential to Karla, this did not necessarily mean news from local journalistic media. For instance, she interpreted her local newspaper’s coverage of an outbreak in her home city as “just a part of the big flood of news”, and argued that the paper had contributed to unfairly accusing young people of increasing infections. Going deeper into what she considered relevant news, she said:

It is about my own interests. My personal life, the frames around our lives, particularly regarding corona, what affects us specifically. I am interested in society, politics, particularly the situation of young people, interested in mental health... It is more about what I think is important in this world.

Another informant is Kåre, a man on disability benefits who belonged to a high-risk group for Covid-19 complications. He had moved from a big city to live with family in a rural area that remained, at the time of the interview, infection free. His media repertoire consisted of a high number of local, national, and international news outlets, podcasts, and radio programmes, and he had reduced news use since the intensity of the pandemic's outbreak. Kåre talked about a distinction between following the pandemic primarily as an event in the news, and as related to personal risk assessment:

Well, to the extent that it was personal, I followed what happened in [the city where he lived], mostly, and then a bit more, not on an intellectual level, but I also followed what happened out there in the world; but I didn't sit and watch press conferences on TV, nor listen to them on the radio.

Another element of Kåre's news navigation concerned paywalls and how to circumvent them: He subscribed to digital news outlets and was willing to pay for news, but he still wanted access to more. He was critical of editorial policies and decisions regarding Covid-19 information behind paywalls, arguing that publicly relevant information needed to be broadly available. Here, the local media of what he considered his home city were particularly to blame:

Among Norwegian online news sites, I primarily used *NRK.no* and *VG.no*, since you didn't have to pay there for something I felt was important... for the journalistic mission. I mean, issues of public interest and important issues for the community. You can get them without paying, and it is a bit annoying in a time of crisis when [listing several national and regional news media] – when you have to pay for crucial information.

While acknowledging that the information was available through public service broadcaster NRK or newspapers, and that he had sufficient pandemic news outside their paywall, Kåre still argued that in the interest of the community, more local coverage of Covid-19 should be offered free of charge. This point of view corresponds to the suggestion that reactions to paywalled content could drive negativity and decrease trust towards particular news providers (Anderson, 2021). As we pointed out in the previous discussion on trust, it seems as though previously established points of media criticism were accentuated during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the overall relevance of the information provided by the news media was not questioned.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed how people in the Nordic countries navigated the complex information environment during the Covid-19 pandemic in search

for information they perceived as trustworthy and relevant. The Covid-19 crisis has illustrated the complexities of conditions of information abundance, demanding attention to how people navigate digital environments where news is just a part of the mix.

Our findings support an image of Nordic citizens who are well served by their news media – including during a pandemic crisis – and, corresponding to other research, also indicate a continued central role for news media as part of this navigation (e.g., Andersson, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2021). Our quantitative analysis found that familiar patterns of use continued, and sometimes were accentuated, in times of crisis: Nordic news users fear fake news, but they seem to experience misinformation in their information environment to a lesser extent than elsewhere. Local news remains important, but extent and selection depend on the preexisting position of local media in each country. Our qualitative analysis found that risk perception alignment and personally situated relevance were key: The Covid-19 pandemic was experienced as dramatic enough to justify continuous reporting and attention-grabbing headlines, even though people needed to filter information and be more selective over time. Our study joins others in emphasising everyday and emotional contexts of news use as central to such changes in the course of the pandemic (e.g., Broersma & Swart, 2022; Vandenplas et al., 2021).

Considering implications for crisis communication in future pandemics, or other societal crisis situations, we underline two points based on our findings. These points contribute to advancing our understanding of how people navigate complex information environments in crisis situations and can also indicate avenues for further research and conceptual development. First, regarding the fear of misinformation (Damstra et al., 2021; Simon & Camargo, 2021), we need a non-alarmist approach that takes seriously the nuances between people's attitudes towards the issue and evidence of particularly problematic encounters. Even though people might express concern about being a victim of misinformation, the actual experiences of exposure to misinformation and the sources identified as problematic can vary – and studying them further will help move beyond alarmist diagnoses and ultimately provide better grounds for combating misinformation.

Regarding the role of news media as the more trustworthy alternative, we particularly underline that extensive media criticism does not necessarily imply distrust towards the media. An important nuance that emerged in our qualitative in-depth interviews is that it is possible to be critical towards the news media and yet find them relevant and trustworthy, either in general or regarding pandemic news coverage in particular. In a societal crisis such as a pandemic, people seem prone to trust media that convey an overall perception of risk that is aligned with their own. This calls for further research into how

such risk perceptions are formed, and for attention to the relationship between personal experience and mediated information.

Our second point concerns the ways in which media users position themselves and navigate their information environments through different phases of a large-scale and long-term societal crisis (Odén et al., 2016). Orientations towards international, national, regional, local, and hyper-local information appear to overlap as well as fluctuate, but more theoretical groundwork is needed on how and why this happens. Journalism research has already documented an acute and drastic increase in the demand for news, in what we have referred to as the early Covid-19 news spike, but questions remain as to what happened afterwards, when patterns between different users appeared to diverge more (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2021). We find that previously established media systems seem to matter for both short- and long-term news navigation, turning Nordic citizens towards strong legacy media including extensive local news provision and digitalised user patterns. In addition to investigating when and why citizens look for specific information through local journalistic media compared with other sources – including social media, workplace and community websites, and everyday conversation – further theorisation of the temporality of information-seeking during crisis is also needed.

References

- Aharoni, T., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K. (2021). “Be less of a slave to the news”: A text-material perspective on news avoidance among young adults. *Journalism Studies*, 22(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1852885>
- Andersson, U. (2021). *Förtroende för medier: Vinnare och förlorare under pandemin [Trust in media: Winners and losers during the pandemic]*. The SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Austin, L., Fisher Liu, B., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498>
- Bajomi-Lazar, P. (2017). Particularistic and universalistic media policies: Inequalities in the media in Hungary. *Javnost*, 24(2), 162–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1288781>
- Bengtsson, S., & Johansson, S. (2020). A phenomenology of news: Understanding news in digital culture. *Journalism*, 22(11), 2873–2889. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919901194>
- Broersma, M., & Swart, J. (2022). Do novel routines stick after the pandemic? The formation of news habits during Covid-19. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 551–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932561>
- Dahl, J. M., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021, August 18–20). *Monitoring the infection rate: What news users consider valuable information in the pandemic* [Conference presentation]. NordMedia, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- Damstra, A., Boomgaarden, H. G., Broda, E., Lindgren, E., Strömbäck, J., Tsifti, Y., & Vliegenthart, R. (2021). What does fake look like? A review of the literature on intentional deception in the news and on social media. *Journalism Studies*, 22(14), 1947–1963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1979423>
- de Bruin, K., de Haan, Y., Vliegenthart, R., Kruijkemeier, S., & Boukes, M. (2021). News avoidance during the Covid-19 crisis: Understanding information overload. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1394–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1957967>

- Eastbury, D. (2022). *YouGov research methods: More detail on YouGov research methods*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/uncategorized/2020/yougov-research-methods/>
- Elvestad, E., & Phillips, A. (2018). *Misunderstanding news audiences: Seven myths of the social media era*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315444369>
- Groot Kormelink, T., & Klein Gunnewiek, A. (2022). From “far away” to “shock” to “fatigue” to “back to normal”: How young people experienced news during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932560>
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>
- Hasebrink, U., & Domeyer, H. (2012). Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices: A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments. *Participations*, 9(2), 757–779.
- Jin, Y., Fraustino, J. D., Fisher Liu, B. (2016). The scared, the outraged, and the anxious: How crisis emotions, involvement, and demographics predict publics’ conative coping. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 10(4), 289–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/153118X.2016.1160401>
- Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: When the Covid-19 pandemic becomes “normalized”. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(sup1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- Kleis Nielsen, R., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Simon, F. M. (2020, October 27). *Communications in the coronavirus crisis: Lessons for the second wave*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave>
- Lowrey, W. (2004). Media dependency during a large-scale social disruption: The case of September 11. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7(3), 339–357. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0703_5
- Mannell, K., & Meese, J. (2022). From doom-scrolling to news avoidance: Limiting news as a wellbeing strategy during Covid lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 23(3), 302–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2021105>
- Meijer, I. C., & Groot Kormelink, T. (2020). *Changing news use: Unchanged news experience?* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041719>
- Mihelj, S., Kondor, K., & Štětka, V. (2021). Audience engagement with Covid-19 news: The impact of lockdown and live coverage, and the role of polarization. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5-6), 569–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1931410>
- Moe, H. (2019). Why free news matters for social inequality: Comparing willingness to pay for news in the Nordic region. In J. Trappel (Ed.), *Digital media inequalities: Policies against divides, distrust and discrimination* (pp. 229–243). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-5550>
- Moe, H., Ytre-Arne, B., & Uberg Nærland, T. (2019). Between ritual and information: Three phases of norwegian news audiences’ sense-making of the election of Donald Trump. *Journalism*, 22(11), 2764–2780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919883103>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schultz, A., Simge, A., Robertson, C. T., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2021). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schultz, A., Simge, A., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2020). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2020*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/>
- Odén, T., Djerf-Pierre, M., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2016). *Kriskommunikation 2.0: Allmänhet, medier och myndigheter i det digitala medielandskapet [Crisis communication 2.0: Public, media, and authorities in the digital media landscape]*. MSB. <https://www.msb.se/sv/publikationer/kriskommunikation-2.0--allmanhet-medier-och-myndigheter-i-det-digitala-medielandskapet/>

- Ohlsson, J., Blach-Ørsten, M., & Willig, I. (Eds.). (2021). Covid-19 och de Nordiska nyhetsmedierna [Covid-19 and the Nordic news media]. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855473>
- Quandt, T., & Wahl-Jørgensen, K. (2021). The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism: Introduction to special issue: Covering Covid-19: The coronavirus pandemic as a critical moment for digital journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1199–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996253>
- Simon, F. M., & Camargo, C. Q. (2021). Autopsy of a metaphor: The origins, use and blind spots of the ‘infodemic’. *New Media and Society*. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211031908>
- Strabac, Z., & Aalberg, T. (2011). Measuring political knowledge in telephone and web surveys: A cross-national comparison. *Social Science Computer Review*, 29(2), 175–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439310371340>
- Syvertsen, T., Enli, G., Mjøs, O. J., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. University of Michigan Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001>
- Van Aelst, P., Toth, F., Castro, L., Štětka, V., de Vreese, C., Aalberg, T., Cardenal, A. S., Corbu, N., Esser, F., Hopmann, D. N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., Strömbäck, J., & Theocharis, Y. (2021). Does a crisis change news habits? A comparative study of the effects of Covid-19 on news media use in 17 European countries. *Digital Journalism*, 9(9), 1316–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943481>
- Vandenplas, R., Truyens, P., Vis, S., & Picone, I. (2021). Tuning out the news: A cross-media perspective on news avoidance practices of young news users in Flanders during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 22(16), 2197–2217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1990788>
- Wagner, M. C., & Boczkowski, P. J. (2019). The reception of fake news: The interpretations and practices that shape the consumption of perceived misinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 7(7), 870–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1653208>
- Westlund, O., & Ghersetti, M. (2015). Modelling news media use: Positing and applying the GC/MC model to the analysis of media use in everyday life and crisis situations. *Journalism Studies*, 16(2), 133–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.868139>
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2020). *Novel coronavirus situation report – 13*. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2018). Approximately informed, occasionally monitorial? Reconsidering normative citizen ideals. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(2), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218771903>
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2021). Doomscrolling, monitoring and avoiding: News use in Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 22(13), 1739–1755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1952475>
- Ørmen, J. (2016). Are you paying attention? Keeping up with news in daily life. In J. L. Jensen, M. Mortensen, & Ørmen, J. (Eds.), *News across media: The production, distribution and consumption of news* (pp. 162–180). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692456>