

Media and gender

A Nordic perspective

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Who is afraid of gender? Judith Butler provocatively asks in her latest book addressing the polarised controversies stirred by the concept of gender in recent years. Her question is posed amid a surge of conservative and far-right movements that have significantly fuelled antagonism around gender debates far beyond the relatively niche circles that have traditionally been preoccupied with its conceptualisation and implications. In these debates, what Butler (2024) dubs “the phantasm of gender” is invoked as a threat to Western civilisation, a denial of nature, an attack on masculinity and “traditional family values”, or an effacement of the differences between sexes. Across Europe, such ideas have been propagated, in particular by actors within the so-called anti-gender ideology movement that leverages various forms of activism to undermine the rights of women and queer and trans people in areas from reproductive justice to protections against gendered violence. But even beyond these highly politicised circles, gender does indeed seem to have become a source of division in public discourse to the extent that the toxicity which increasingly surrounds the notion has been reported to discourage scholars and journalists alike from even engaging with the issue in public debate (Bladini, 2020; Møller Hartley & Askanus, 2021; Paternotte, 2019).

Media scholars from across the Nordics and beyond seem to remain undeterred, however. They continue to delve into critical analysis of the persistent disparities in media production, representation, and power related to gender. For this issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, we wanted to update insights on longstanding issues at the core of our discipline on the nexus between media and gender in relation to contemporary developments in politics, culture, and technology. Our call was met with a resounding response, and this year’s issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* features the ten selected articles that emerged from this call, showcasing the latest insights and advancements in the field.

Gender imbalances persist in the fields of media production and journalism. The articles in this issue present new empirical evidence highlighting the ongoing disparity in the portrayal of men and women in news media, as well as in the film industry, where men are significantly more likely than women to write, direct, and produce movies. However, there are also encouraging developments that suggest potential for positive change. Magin, Haßler, Larsson, and Skogerbø, for example, find that top politicians in both Germany and Norway are breaking away from traditional gender roles in political communication, refusing to restrict their self-representations on social media to certain stereotypical or preconceived notions of gender. The articles in this issue also showcase new kinds of media that require new approaches; for example, an analysis of Icelandic TikTok activists uses multimodal analysis to understand the embodied communication of this genre, and another study explores how Swedish Instagram posts about Muslim women's use of veils both enforce hegemonic structures and allow women to challenge the dominant discourse. With global communication networks, the idea of what it means to be Nordic is not only shaped in the Nordic countries. Lee and Abidin illustrate this by analysing vlogs by Japanese and South Korean influencers living in Nordic countries, showing how their romanticised visions of peaceful and harmonious Nordic life feature domesticity and nature, neither acknowledging nor criticising the implicit gender segregation in their videos.

This issue also offers new research on activism and rights, examining both historical and contemporary experiences. One study explores the Swedish Women's Association's Radio Committee in the 1930s and its efforts to increase women's representation. Another brings attention to contemporary experiences in newsrooms, where sexism and precarity continue to present challenges to women journalists. Finally, one article looks at anti-gender activists and their social media campaigns against LGBTIQ+ rights, finding that despite the intense social media activity, campaigns on Twitter (now X) specifically did not have much uptake in audience engagement.

The study of the intersections of media and gender is a burgeoning area of research with a long history in the Nordic research community; yet only rarely are these dispersed studies brought together and into conversation with one another across the region. One of the most recent comprehensive inventories of media research on gender in the Nordic countries was edited by Anja Hirdman and Madeleine Kleberg (2015) a little less than a decade ago. In *Mediers känsla för kön* [*Media's sense of gender*] published by Nordicom, a centre for Nordic media research at the University of Gothenburg, the authors included scholars in media and communication studies working on gender or with feminist perspectives. They raised questions of the implications of significant technological developments and the entry of, at the time, relatively new tech giants like Google and Facebook to the gendered aspects of media production and consumption. Building on the foundations of pioneering international research, the contributions of previous scholars in the Nordics, and the efforts at Nordicom to integrate critical perspectives on gender and media, particularly the work of Ulla Carlsson (1993), the volume demonstrates the strengths and analytical capabilities of combining gender and

media studies. It highlights theoretical perspectives such as intersectionality and the affective turn for understanding topics such as the construction of masculinities in talent shows, gender dynamics in sports blogs, queer femininity in gaming, or female journalists' use of new media technologies. Much has happened to academic and public debate on these issues since the release of this volume. Yet a lot of the key concerns raised by previous generations of scholars persist, as evidenced by the themes and questions raised by the authors.

In the years following Hirdman and Kleberg's publication, the #metoo movement dramatically upended many of the deep-seated conceptions of the Nordic region as a gender-equal utopia. In the wake of the consequent waves of the global movement that swept across the world in 2017 and onwards, we have seen heated and rapidly shifting public conversations around gender inequality and injustices in the Nordic countries. As such, the #metoo movement poked holes in the longstanding myths of gender equality as a closed case or *fait accompli* that are often rehearsed in and about the Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular (Dahlerup, 2018; Møller Hartley & Askanius, 2022). The global movement has brought widespread conversations on systemic sexism and gender-based harassment and violence, far beyond the narrow circles of activists and scholars, about the role of social media in gender(ed) struggles, gender (mis)representations, and power structures in media organisations and cultural industries. In many regards, there is a renewed interest in issues related to the entrenched and persistent structures of gender inequality permeating society and the role of the media in reproducing or challenging these structures.

At the face of it, the #metoo movement and adjacent campaigns have helped moved the conversation beyond post-feminist narratives and into discussions about systemic power and intersecting forms of oppression. At the same time, a considerable anti-feminist backlash and transnational resistance against gender equality discourse and gender mainstreaming tools have followed in the wake of this global movement. In Sweden, the backlash has mainly been orchestrated by non-institutional actors involved in the extensive web of alternative news media in the country who have been pushing anti-feminist ideas onto the agenda as part of a larger campaign presenting "gender ideology" and "excessive feminism" as the root cause of mass immigration, and in extension, an alleged societal collapse of Nordic welfare states. A recent study from the University of Gothenburg showed that young men across Europe feel increasingly threatened by advances in women's rights and gender parity and place Sweden among the top-ten countries in which these attitudes of "modern sexism" are on the rise among younger generations (Off et al., 2022). In Denmark, on the other hand, the backlash against gender research and policy has partly come from within institutional politics led by members of parliament from the Liberal Alliance and Danish People's Party who have been ardently campaigning against institutions, programmes, and individual researchers in the area of gender studies and postcolonial and migration studies, many of whom have been singled out in the media and accused of being partisan or "activist", and who have consequently experienced online harassment and trolling (see, e.g., Baggersgaard, 2022;

Thorup & Andreassen, 2021). In Norway and Finland, similar controversies have saturated public and academic debate on these issues. However, we have yet to see the same kind of harsh attacks on gender studies in academic institutions from political parties or organised interests. Still, increasing public attention has been given to the tendency that boys and young men struggle to keep up with girls and young women in education and social life, prompting criticism of existing gender equality policies and their impacts. Additionally, gendered and sexualised violence, misogyny, and hate remain recurring themes in research politics, and social life in Norway and Finland as well (see, e.g., Gjerstad et al., 2023).

Indeed, gender has become controversial and politically polarising to the extent that it has reached the top of the agenda in terrorism and extremism research. In fact, in the Nordic Conference on Violent Extremism held at Oslo University in June 2024 (University of Oslo, 2024), a considerable share of the programme was dedicated to discussions of a growing gender(ed) extremism. Security services and extremism scholars are raising concerns about the proliferation of violent misogyny in online spaces. Research has shown that mainstream social media facilitates the spread of harmful ideologies, including misogyny and transphobia (Banet Weiser, 2018; Zuckerberg, 2018). The Oslo Pride shooting in 2022 is a stark and tragic illustration of the growing problem of transphobia in online spaces and society at large, providing evidence that the proliferation of harmful and dehumanising language targeting transgender communities can incite real-world violence. Further, the impact of misogynistic online influencers operating on platforms like TikTok or YouTube on gender norms among adolescents is similarly a growing concern. In the Nordic context specifically, several reports have documented a rise in misogyny and ideas of male supremacy in mainstream online spaces and the emergence of a distinctly “Nordic manosphere” (Cybernauterne, 2020; Hansson et al., 2024; Mogensen & Holding Rand, 2020), where online interactions and discussions coalesce around anti-feminist, homophobic, and misogynist ideas (Fernquist et al., 2020; Mogensen & Holding Rand, 2019; Langeland et al., 2022; Prøitz et al., 2022). Such online environments can contribute to real-world violence, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating a culture of misogyny. Women who speak out in public and challenge these ideas are often shamed, ridiculed, or harassed online (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). This highlights the need for further research on how both online communities and networks of social media influencers shape young people’s attitudes and the role of digital platforms in either reinforcing or challenging these harmful narratives.

With this issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, we invited scholars to address these and neighbouring developments, bringing us up to speed with the state of the art in the field. What new ideas, discussions, concepts, and methods are emerging in studies at the intersection of media and gender in the Nordic countries and beyond? The articles included in the issue cover a broad range of empirical and conceptual contributions reflecting both longstanding issues and emerging trends in the discussion on media and gender falling under three broad thematic areas.

Bodies, identities, and imaginaries

The issue opens with an article that analyses TikTok as a space of embodied performativity and affect to communicate political messages around gender inequality. In “Embodying scenes of moral disorder: Bodily gestures as a site of signification in feminist TikTok activism”, Heba Sigurdardottir and Hanna Rautajoki explore short-form videos from the Icelandic feminist group Öfgar [Extreme], posted during the second wave of the #metoo movement in Iceland in 2021. Highlighting the significance of the body and facial gestures to this mode of online activism, Sigurdardottir and Rautajoki shed light on the activists’ efforts to create awareness and debate around gender-based violence and the lack of political responsibility and legal justice in this area, in Iceland and beyond.

The female body as a site of political struggle and identity is similarly at the heart of Mia Lövhelm and Linnea Jensdotter’s analysis of online discussions on Islam, secularism, and gender equality in Sweden: “Veiling as free choice or coercion: Banal religion, gender equality, and Swedish identity on Instagram”. Drawing on a combined co-occurrence analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis, Lövhelm and Jensdotter examine Instagram posts responding to the Christian Democrats political party’s 2021 proposal to ban girls from wearing veils in primary schools. Their study shows that Instagram works as a platform that both reinforces hegemonic ideas of gender, ethnic, and religious identities while also enabling Muslim women to challenge prevalent understandings and prejudices around Islam and female oppression in public debate.

The third article in this section represents an “outside perspective” on the Nordics, featuring Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin’s analysis of how female East Asian YouTube vloggers, who have immigrated to Nordic countries, engage in imaginaries and fantastical narratives around Nordic living and lifestyles. In the article, titled “Fantasised and fantastical Nordic imaginaries: Contextualising Nordic life vlogs by East Asian YouTube vloggers”, Lee and Abidin explore this specific social media influencer genre to understand how these vlogs serve as a platform for young East Asian women to project their desire for a better life, including advanced career mobility, personal well-being, and gender equality. Through these practices, the vloggers present a fantasy of the Nordics that stands in opposition to the competitive overworking culture of East Asia by emphasising wholesome scenes of slow-paced lives where work and home are balanced.

Production and (re)presentation

In the second section, which covers research on gender disparities in media production and representation, Anna Karina Kjeldsen, Line Schmeltz, and Jacob V. Simonsen provide a fresh take on a longstanding issue in media research: the continued gender disparity in news media and its implications for balanced media content and perspectives. In their article, “A broken mirror? From representation to presentation of gender in Scandinavian news media”, Kjeldsen, Schmeltz, and Simonsen draw on empirical data and analysis of content from nine Scandinavian news media to offer a comprehensive framework for study-

ing gender representation and portrayal in news content. Disparities in content usually reflect disparities in positions of power, and in this sense, their study echoes a recent study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism which revealed that only 24 per cent of top editors across major news outlets in twelve countries are women, despite women constituting 40 per cent of journalists in these markets (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024).

Similar tendencies persist in the film industry. In “Gender inequality in the Nordic film industry: Exploring above-the-line positions in film production”, Skadi Loist, Martha Emilie Ehrich, Sophie Radziwill, and Elizabeth Prommer report on a study documenting existing gender equality barriers within this profession. Analysing the composition of creative roles involved in the production of 1,070 films between 2010 and 2020 across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden revealed that men dominate directing, writing, and producing in 75 per cent of cases, with a slight increase in women producers most pronounced in Iceland and Finland. Further, their study shows that there is a negative correlation between male-dominated producing roles and female presence in directing and writing, whereas more women in managerial positions correlate with increased female directors in Sweden and writers in Finland. The findings show progress but highlight enduring structural barriers to gender equality in the industry.

The film industry is similarly subject to critical scrutiny in “Expressions of a backlash: Challenging the story of success in Norwegian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s”, which details historical developments that have stifled progress towards gender equality in Norwegian cinema. In this article, Maria Fosheim Lund, Johanne Kielland Servoll, and Ingrid Synneva Holtar revisit a period in time often celebrated for its advances in feminist filmmaking, to offer an alternative reading of the “success story” that accounts for the anti-backlash affecting the representation of women both in front of and behind the camera. Analysing a broad range of sources, including moving images, film reviews, interviews, press materials, and media coverage of film productions, Lund, Servoll, and Holtar highlight experiences and expressions of a harsh climate and anti-feminist backlash in Norwegian cinema leading to career stagnation and loss of position for female film directors.

The final article of this section, “Walking the line of the double bind: A cross-country comparison on women and men politicians’ self-presentations on social media”, reports on a comparative study of self-presentation of politicians on social media in Germany and Norway. In an effort to understand the gendered dynamics of how women and men politicians present themselves on social media, Melanie Magin, Jörg Haßler, Anders Olof Larsson, and Eli Skogerbø find little evidence of stark differences in gendered self-presentations in either country, neither in terms of personalisation nor in terms of gender issue ownership. The authors argue that these results, which contradict previous research in the area, might be explained by changing and less-binary gender roles in Germany and Norway. Alternatively, the successful politicians analysed may adeptly navigate the “double bind” of conforming to both masculine and feminine gender expectations among the general public, indicating that politicians are increasingly challenging gender stereotypes in their strategic communication.

Activism, rights, and historical contexts

In “Women’s struggle and media reform: The Swedish Women’s Associations’ Radio Committee, 1933–1940”, Fredrik Stiernstedt analyses the efforts of the Swedish Women’s Associations’ Radio Committee (SKFR) in advocating for women’s representation in Swedish public radio from 1933 to 1940. Stiernstedt highlights SKFR’s pragmatic approach and the influential role of pioneering women such as Ruth Stjernstedt and Margareta von Konow in leveraging personal networks and societal status to influence change in the profession. The article contextualises “the case of Sweden” and the organisation’s work within broader media reform movements and social history, emphasising the importance of building alliances with wider social movements for successful reforms. Drawing on these historical lessons, Stiernstedt argues that insights on the efforts of the women involved in SKFR might usefully inform current initiatives and activism for more inclusive and democratic media.

Almost a century after the women of SKFR fought for equal rights, many female journalists still experience hitting the glass ceiling in a deeply gendered newsroom. In “Living the liquid life: Gender, precarity, and journalism in the post-#metoo era”, Margareta Melin and Jenny Wiik explore how sexual harassment, precarity, and systemic inequalities are part of the everyday struggles experienced by female journalists on short-term contracts in Sweden. Their interview study shows that despite the advances made in recent years, not least by journalists rallying around the #metoo movement, structural issues in the media industry persist, thus highlighting the continued need for inclusive, equitable working conditions in journalism.

The issue is wrapped up with a timely article on one of the most pressing topics in contemporary debates and moral panics over gender. In “Understanding the current backlash against LGBTIQ+ rights through the lens of heteroactivism: A case study of the International Organization for the Family’s transnational norm diffusion on Twitter”, Cecilia Strand, Åsa Eriksson, and Jakob Svensson offer an in-depth case study of the social media tactics of the International Organization for the Family (IOF) – an influential transnational organisation in the so-called anti-gender ideology movement. Drawing on critical perspectives for understanding new forms of heteroactivism, Strand, Eriksson, and Svensson show that actors in these movements present themselves as human rights champions and protectors of the rights of the “natural family” and moral order while framing sexual and gender minorities as dangers to society. Using social media to leverage largely positive “pro-family” messages, the IOF fails to gain any significant traction for their messaging in mainstream social media platforms like Twitter (now X), however. Strand, Eriksson, and Svensson conclude by calling attention to the growing presence of anti-gender rhetoric in Sweden, issuing a warning against complacency or assuming that the Nordic countries should somehow be immune to the powerful political forces currently challenging long fought-for and taken-for-granted rights of women and LGBTIQ+ minorities.

What's missing and what next?

While a range of perspectives and themes on gender and media are covered in this issue, more research is needed on the implications of rapidly developing media technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality processes of platformisation and datafication. Developments in technology and the mainstreaming of AI raises important questions about gender (Korsvik et al., 2020). AI-generated content and recommendation systems build on previous media structures influenced by built-in biases, and both the training data and algorithms are largely developed outside the Nordic region. Virtual reality and augmented reality interfaces, whether in real-life situations or as imagined in videogames and cinema, can make encoded assumptions about gender visible and actionable in new ways (Gunderson, 2021). Big Data and AI tend to encode gender as binary, creating or exacerbating existing societal biases. While there is a growing body of work on this (e.g., Gillespie, 2024; Gorska & Jemielniak, 2023; Lucy & Bamman, 2021), it is often outside the field of media studies (Søraa, 2023). In the years to come, we will need more research both on how the use of generative AI affects the media industry and on how it affects the representation of gender across different media.

We did not receive any submissions within queer and trans studies approaches to studying gender and media. Given the rise of new forms of gendered extremism described above, we need research on queer and trans gender identities. Media studies may also profit from the growing body of queer and trans theory.

With this publication we have (re)started conversations about a wide variety of trends, themes, and topics on the intersections of media and gender and hope that others will help keep it alive.

Acknowledgements

Jill Walker Rettberg's contribution was supported by the Research Council of Norway through its Centres of Excellence scheme (project number 332643).

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