

# Intervening by staying professional

*How Nordic environmental journalists make sense of their roles*

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## ABSTRACT

The notion of intervention is gaining traction among Western environmental journalists. While existing research has predominantly focused on countries outside the Nordic region, in our study we investigate the self-perceptions of professional journalists in the Nordic countries of Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Through semi-structured interviews, we examine the roles that Nordic journalists construct when reflecting on covering the environmental beat, paying particular attention to how they make sense of the idea of intervening – that is, their involvement in interpreting, making sense of, and engaging the public in environmental issues. Using thematic qualitative analysis to analyse the interviews, we have identified four journalistic roles: 1) objective news provider, 2) critical watchdog, 3) sense-maker and educator, and 4) environmental advocate. Our findings suggest that Nordic journalists intervene by adhering to professional norms and practices and renegotiating them. While the role of objective news provider remains prominent among Nordic journalists, it is intertwined with various forms of intervention across all identified roles.

**KEYWORDS:** journalistic roles, journalistic role perceptions, Nordic countries, environmental reporting, climate journalism

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## Introduction

The roles that contemporary journalism and journalists play are questions of vital importance in public debates on environmental issues. As powerful actors in environmental communication – able to elevate issues to the public agenda and frame them from selected perspectives – professional news media can have a vital position in facilitating future-oriented discussions and solutions regarding the environment, nature, and climate. Many processes regarding the environment and people's interest in related issues are important and yet challenging for journalism (Bødker & Morris, 2021; Hansen & Cox, 2015).

Countries around the globe are affected by environmental changes, and 2023 was the warmest year ever recorded in the world (World Meteorological Organization, 2024). In the Global North glaciers are melting, and seawater is rising. The environment is prominent on the public agenda in the Nordic countries, and many Europeans demonstrate a high level of commitment to climate crisis mitigation and green transitions. Among Europeans, climate change recently obtained third position among the most serious problems facing the world, after 1) poverty, hunger, and lack of drinking water, and 2) armed conflicts (European Union, 2023). Within the Nordic countries, 55–75 per cent consider climate change a serious or a very serious problem (Tapia et al., 2023: 12).

While news media have been an important source of environmental information for the public in different parts of the world (Hase et al., 2021; Keller et al., 2020; Schäfer & Painter, 2021; Wakefield & Elliott, 2003), climate journalism is experiencing difficulties in reaching larger audiences (Schäfer & Painter, 2021). Furthermore, the public increasingly distrusts media as a source of information on climate change (Cheng & Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021; Willig et al., 2022). The scientific complexity of environmental processes as well as their political and cultural character also influence the decrease in public interest and trust in environmental journalism (Fahy & Nisbet, 2011; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Painter et al., 2024).

As a response to the challenges, research is increasingly focusing on how environmental and climate journalists are rethinking their professional roles and ethos. Recent research has found that the uncertain and rapidly changing nature of climate challenges may require journalists and scientists to act more as advocates, dialogue brokers, and interpreters of scientific facts (Brüggemann et al., 2020). Another argument is that civic-interventionist roles can better engage the public in environmental issues (Nelson, 2021). Journalists are encouraging the public to become involved in public debates and participate in social, political, and cultural life, raising awareness about profound problems. The idea of intervening is becoming more pronounced among the professional community of Western journalists, suggesting that journalists might push past their passive, fact-based, disseminator role to intervene in the interpretation of events (Esser & Umbrecht, 2014; Pagiotti et al., 2024). In our study, we understand intervening as journalistic involvement in interpreting and making sense of facts as well as engaging the public.

Scholarly focus on the roles perceived by environmental journalists has mainly assessed countries outside the Nordic region (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014; Cheng & Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Willig et al., 2022). In this regard, Nordic environmental and climate journalists are of particular interest as they are characterised by strong ideals of objectivity and professional autonomy (Ahva et al., 2017; Hujanen, 2016). To produce new and up-to-date insights, in this article we thus examine Nordic professional journalists' perceptions of their roles in environmental reporting, posing two questions:

RQ1. What are the roles constructed in Nordic journalists' talk regarding environmental issues?

RQ2. How is the idea of intervening made sense of and defined within the roles?

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we explore the theory of journalistic roles and discuss previous studies on the professional roles of environmental journalists. The countries studied are explained in the next section, followed by a description of the methodology. The results section provides an analysis of the four main roles identified, and then we present our final conclusions and offer suggestions for future research.

## **Journalistic roles and interventions in environmental reporting**

Role orientations are approached through the concept of role perception. The concepts referring to journalistic roles are somewhat inconsistent: Role perceptions have also been referred to as role orientations, role conceptions, cognitive roles, narrated roles, and normative roles (Hanusch & Banjac, 2018). We understand journalistic roles as “generalized expectations which journalists believe exist in society and among different stakeholders, which they see as normatively acceptable, and which influence their behaviour on the job” (Donsbach, 2008: 1). In addition to journalists' own idealisations, the notion of role perceptions usefully acknowledges broader societal and social expectations regarding the journalistic profession (Mellado et al., 2017). Environmental reporting is thus shaped by the journalistic roles that environmental journalists are expected to fulfil and the roles they perceive as important.

As contextual constructions, role perceptions are connected to political cultures and the way the media system works. The traditionally strong presence of high-modern ideals of journalism within the journalism profession is central to the current negotiation of professional roles among Nordic journalists, that is, a strong identity of serving as autonomous watchdogs and an assumed “objective”, passive role of information disseminators (e.g., Ahva et al., 2017; Hovden & Väliaverronen, 2021; Hujanen, 2016). Whether journalists perceive their role in environmental communication as neutral and objective, or more as advocates or activists, is a topical theme in research (Nicolaisen, 2022a, 2022b; Painter et al., 2022; Schäfer & Painter, 2021; Strauss et al., 2022).

Recent research suggests that journalists' professional performance is about balancing journalistic objectivity and environmental advocacy. Research on American environmental journalists shows that while serving as disseminators of complex scientific information, journalists perceived themselves as advocates for environmental injustices or denouncers of business malpractices (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2014). Research on journalists from five countries with high CO2 emissions and climate change scepticism – Germany, India, Switzerland, the UK, and the US – reveals that the norm of balanced reporting has been skewed in climate change reporting. It has tilted from (falsely) balanced reporting, aiming at neutrally juxtaposing deniers and warners, to more authoritative reporting that contextualises different voices (Brüggemann, 2017).

At the same time, many journalists resist the label of activist. Instead, they have asserted their role as objective reporters even though they may think that climate action is needed (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). Moreover, the strong advocacy role has been criticised by Western environmental journalists. Research on environmental journalists from the UK, Ireland, and the US demonstrates a stance against an advocacy role. Respondents argued that “reporting evidence and scientific reality does not equate to advocacy” (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021: 1300). Instead, journalists perceive their emerging role as educating people and curating environment-related information. A recent literature review similarly found no endorsement of a political advocacy role among climate journalists; instead, journalists tend to exhibit a more pro-environmental commitment (Nicolaisen, 2022a, 2022b).

The whole picture of journalists in environmental issues is even broader. Recent research on European journalists from four countries who covered heatwaves and climate change demonstrates the strongest role perception of journalists as educators, followed by those of curator, watchdog, and gatekeeper, while journalists identify least with the role of advocate (Strauss et al., 2022). Research on Norwegian journalists showed varied roles on climate reporting: Some adopted climate advocacy, while many stressed the task of objective news provider (Duarte & Eide, 2018). Research on Swedish journalists revealed increasing awareness of climate change and their belief that educating readers is one of their main tasks. Engagement and encouraging collective action were not mentioned as anticipated outcomes (Appelgren & Jönsson, 2021). Another study found that Swedish journalists utilise different creative ways to disseminate their message on climate issues (Berglez, 2011), and further research on Swedish journalists also illustrates how local news media balance roles and expectations. The position of local journalists on environmental issues is complex. The need to support local communities and stakeholders creates challenges for journalists on how to address the local context, for example, business interests, in reporting the climate crisis (Sjölander, 2021).

One factor reshaping journalistic roles in environmental reporting and enhancing their transformation towards curating is the need to compete with bloggers and social media influencers, who have become visible actors of digital environmental communication (Schäfer & Painter, 2021; Tandoc &

Takahashi, 2014). The rise of social media has led journalists to adapt their work routines to include social media (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017; Singer, 2015), as social media provides an opportunity for professional journalists to connect with their audiences outside professional journalism (Mellado & Hermida, 2021). Thereby, the actual roles played by many environmental journalists are no longer those of gatekeeping, which involves responsibility for the selection of topics, information, and voices for public dissemination. Rather, the roles include curating tasks: finding relevant content, restructuring it, and presenting it with added evaluation and orientation to particular audiences (Fahy & Nisbet, 2011; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). However, although the role of journalists as gatekeepers has been challenged in the new media landscape, a recent study has found that they remain the public's preferred gatekeepers in the environmental debate (Nicolaisen, 2024).

Mellado (2015) divided journalistic roles into three dimensions: 1) presence of the journalistic voice – whether a journalist actively *intervenes* (e.g., by interpreting news events or expressing opinions) or more passively *disseminates* information from sources; 2) power relations – whether a journalist acts as a *watchdog* or performs as a *loyal facilitator* for power-holders; and 3) audience approach – whether a journalist facilitates a *civic* function (e.g., audience participation in social, political, and cultural life), provides *service journalism* (e.g., information that helps audiences in their daily lives), or offers *infotainment* to entertain or thrill audiences.

Regarding the renegotiation of journalistic roles and dimensions mentioned by Mellado (2015), the notion of intervening is of special interest here. Intervening traditionally refers to the presence of the journalistic voice in news reporting when journalists take a specific side related to any event, becoming advocates for different groups in society (Mellado, 2015; Pagiotti et al., 2024). Interventionism is linked with interpretative journalism, which is opposed to or extends beyond descriptive, fact-focused, and source-driven journalism (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Previous research demonstrates the growing presence of interpretative journalism and journalistic interventionism in Western media over time (Esser & Umbricht, 2014; Pagiotti et al., 2024; Peeters & Maesele, 2023; Reunanen & Koljonen, 2018). Interpretative journalism is discussed both as a positive practice of making it easier for people to make sense of facts and what is happening, and as a negative one bringing an additional filter to information that is supposed to come as directly as possible from the original sources (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). As such, Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) argued for a more nuanced investigation of the connotations of the interpretative journalism and the extent of intervening.

Since the high-modern ethos of journalism has traditionally been strong among Nordic journalists, renegotiation of the idea of intervening is of relevance. Likewise, the tangible political tensions surrounding environmental and climate issues in the Nordic countries make it topical to study how Nordic journalists consider their own role. In our study, we understand interventionism as referring both to specific textual practices and forms (Mellado, 2015; Pagiotti et al., 2024;

Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012), as well as to the perceptions of journalists about their participation and involvement in the issues they cover.

## The study in context

This research project spans four countries: Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. These Nordic countries are characterised by universal media and communications services as well as strong and institutionalised media freedom – a model referred to as the Nordic media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014). The concept captures the understanding of media services as a public good, a high level of press freedom, and consensual media policy (Syvertsen et al., 2014). The idea of the Nordic media model has, however, been contested due to the transformation towards neoliberal media policy, including increasing privatisation and deregulation (Ala-Fossi et al., 2023; Neff & Pickard, 2023). These shifts are relevant for environmental journalism: Economic pressures result in fewer resources for high-quality independent journalistic work on environmental issues (Lyytimäki, 2020). Journalists often need to cover other beats besides the environment or work as precarious freelancers. Research on local journalists in Sweden, for example, has provided a complicated picture: Local media declare climate a priority topic, but few reporters work exclusively on climate or environmental issues (Sjölander, 2021).

The countries studied share similar environmental challenges, particularly due to the Arctic region warming three times faster than the global average (Rantanen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the consequences of climate change are still relatively remote, both temporally and spatially, for Nordic countries. In a recent survey, most Nordic citizens agreed that climate change is a major problem, while one in five respondents did not believe that acting on climate change is beneficial for the economy; furthermore, one in four worried that jobs may be at risk (Tapia et al., 2023). According to a report on environmental attitudes in the Nordic countries (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020), the media have focused extensively on the engagement of young people with the issue of climate change, bolstered by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the global movement Fridays for Future.

Each Nordic country has their own unique environmental aspects. Iceland has systematically taken advantage of the country's natural resources to produce clean energy, using geothermal reservoirs for heating and producing hydroelectricity to power the electric grid (Orkuveita Reykjavíkur, n.d.), although vast areas of land have been submerged in the process of harnessing energy for heavy industries. Bjarnadóttir and colleagues (2021) found that Icelandic voters have become more positive towards the government prioritising environmental issues. Although some energy projects have been highly controversial and covered extensively by the media (Fréttablaðið, 2005), no newsroom in the country has dedicated environmental reporters. There is also a lack of research on environmental reporting in Iceland.

In Norway, public discourse on environmental issues is heavily influenced by the country's dual role as a leader in environmental action and as a major petroleum producer. This duality is reflected in the media's focus on the oil

industry and the “green shift” towards fossil-free energy systems (Ytterstad & Bødker, 2022; Ytterstad et al., 2022). However, biodiversity loss has recently received much media attention (Bjærke & Andersen, 2023). Although some newsrooms, including the public broadcaster NRK, have invested in environmental journalism, dedicated environmental reporters are still few in most news media (Knudsen, 2022: 62–63). Furthermore, surveys suggest that trust in climate journalism among the Norwegian population is low compared with other areas of science journalism and that one-fifth of media users think that the news media write too much about climate issues (Knudsen, 2022: 6, 62–63, 70).

During the 2022 election in Sweden, coverage of environmental issues decreased in comparison with the 2018 election. Interestingly, the environment became something of a meta-question, questioning “why the climate issue didn’t get more attention [translated]” (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2022: 67). A recent opinion editorial by 14 environmental activists in the trade union publication for journalists, *Journalisten*, criticised the Swedish media coverage and argued that media space is almost exclusively given to the most radical actions, such as air strikes or highway blockades, which they feel contribute to the skewed image of climate activism (Paxling, 2023). A recent study also found evidence of forms of climate scepticism in Swedish media reporting on the IPCC report (Painter et al., 2023).

While Finland is not an exception to the political tensions surrounding environmental and climate issues, previous research has indicated that climate adaptation measures in the largest Finnish news media have not been notably politicised (Perälä, 2023). 25 per cent of Finnish respondents in a Reuters Institute survey claimed to avoid news on climate change and the environment (Reunanen, 2023: 35).

## Methods and material

The data consist of 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in 2023 – five each in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Twelve of the interviewees were female and eight were male, and they were professional journalists who cover environment- and climate-related topics. They were selected by following the environmental reporting in each country to identify established reporters with regular coverage of the topic. On this basis, we made a list of suggestions for each country and discussed the options collectively before deciding on the final selection of informants. All of them work within the news media, most without political affiliation. Their newsrooms range from commercial print and web outlets to public service, and from regional newspapers to national television channels; the medium is thus not our focus here. Whereas some of the practitioners had reported on environmental issues for a long time, others had only recently started covering the topic as news reporters, not producers of opinion material. Most were not specialised environmental reporters but rather general news reporters with a special interest in the beat. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Since the number of environmental professional reporters

is limited in all the Nordic countries, to secure anonymity we do not provide detailed information about the media houses where the interviewees work – neither demographic details nor political orientation of the medium.

The interview guide in question was developed and discussed among the research group to fit the purposes of the study and pre-tested through a pilot study with three journalists. Members of the research group translated the guide into the national languages. The guide included 25 questions, divided into three sections: journalistic agency and responsibility – the roles of journalism and journalists; newsroom practices and routines; and politicisation of the agenda. In this study, we mainly draw on the answers to questions in the first section, which included the informants' general views on journalism's role in environmental issues and how they specifically perceived their own roles and responsibilities as environmental reporters. We invited them to talk about what a "good" environmental story is and the functions that environmental reporting should perform in relation to an audience and society more broadly. Furthermore, we asked questions regarding the informants' views of environmental activism, the relationship between activism and journalism, and whether and how they think the environmental beat differs from other beats. The interviews, lasting 45–80 minutes, were conducted online or face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed in full; the data was pseudonymised during the transcription process. Thereafter, the interviews were translated by each interviewer into English.

To analyse the data, we used thematic qualitative analysis. The goal of the analysis was to identify key themes in the responses given by the environmental journalists regarding perceptions of their roles. We constructed these themes through actively interpreting the data, employing the multistep approach developed by Kvale (1996). The analysis is exploratory and hermeneutic, moving back and forth between transcriptions, our interpretations of the journalists' responses, and the existing literature and theoretical concepts that informed our interpretation. First, we carefully read each transcript, noting important themes contained therein. We then determined condensed meaning units with respect to the respondents' perspectives and viewpoints. We assessed connections and patterns across the data to identify the dominant points of issue in the respondents' narratives, thereby condensing the themes. Finally, we collectively formed the essential themes to capture the journalists' perceptions of their roles.

In summary, the goal of the thematic analysis was to identify patterns and noteworthy anomalies in how the journalists spoke about and constructed their roles in relation to environmental issues (RQ1). In addition to searching for recurring themes in the informants' answers, we also examined how they navigated between roles, made sense of, and defined the idea of intervening within different roles (RQ2). The analysis was conducted both individually and collectively. First, each author marked important statements and quotations and assigned them to identified themes. Then, all quotations were later examined and discussed collectively by the whole research group. We all reached a consensus on how to interpret and classify the findings, then returned to the transcriptions for a second round of analysis. Illustrative quotes to exemplify the findings

were jointly selected. Each quote was assigned a code relating to the country (F = Finland, I = Iceland, N = Norway, and S = Sweden), and the interviewees in each country were assigned a number from 1 to 5.

In what follows, we present the roles identified in the interviews. To elucidate the content of the different roles, we present them separately, although they are not mutually exclusive. We first explore how journalists construct the role of the objective news provider. Then, we turn to the critical watchdog role before exploring that of the sense-maker and educator. Finally, we pay particular attention to the role of the environmental advocate and how journalists negotiate this position against the other roles.

## Findings

### The role of objective news provider

A central role apparent in the interview data is that of an objective news provider. In accordance with the traditional ideal of professional journalism, several of the journalists interviewed emphasised the importance of relying on facts, presenting scientific findings accurately, being balanced in their reporting, and not exacerbating polarisation on environmental issues. The role of the objective news provider is connected in our data with the requirement of being personally interested and well informed about topics. Furthermore, when relying on this role, the journalists stressed the importance of keeping their professional and private lives separate and limiting their personal activities to outside of work.

Overall, the Nordic journalists initially stressed that they do not view environmental journalism as being much different from other beats, in terms of journalistic methods, ethics, or their role and societal mission. Unlike many other beats, however, environmental issues often arouse social tensions and conflicts, which play a crucial role when the journalists negotiate the role of objective news provider. The sources of conflict include tensions between environmental protection measures and business interests, livelihoods, and lifestyles. Journalists' commitment to covering these issues is not deterred by the conflicts involved; instead, it intensifies their dedication to ensuring factual accuracy, providing balanced reporting and avoiding polarising triggers, such as using sensationalist "rage baits" in headlines (e.g., F4, N5).

According to many of the informants, environmental issues stir emotions, and their conflictual nature may cause journalists to be associated with specific positions and accused of bias. The journalists were acutely aware of this dynamic and stressed the importance of maintaining professionalism and avoiding being associated with any interest groups.

Within the role of objective news provider, an important journalistic norm is to include various voices with differing opinions and "seek to elucidate both sides of a given conflict" (N4). Such voices are easily found through social media, where environmental reporting can also be discussed and interactions with readers encouraged. However, being objective and offering a platform for

diverse viewpoints does not entail giving voice to climate deniers. Instead, journalists understand balanced and objective reporting as encompassing all facets of conflicts related to solutions and decisions without pushing or advocating a particular standpoint. This view was reflected by several interviewees:

Sometimes one feels compelled to refute things that are presented by people with certain political leanings, usually those who completely deny that this problem exists, but it also happens that one has to fact-check those who are all for taking action. [...] One has to correct the public discourse. (I4)

A general rule in journalism is to always be impartial, to always talk to both sides. But there are those who do not think we have a climate crisis, even though it is scientifically proven. As such, one must be able to have the crisis as a point of departure. (S3)

Overall, while emphasising the norm of balanced reporting, the journalists dismissed giving voice to climate deniers, thus providing a “false balance” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004) to climate science. The idea of intervening is thus arguably present, impacting the role of objective news provider. Hence, the ideal of objectivity can contain an inherent contradiction when role perceptions among the interviewees also reveal a level of intervention.

### **The role of critical watchdog**

The classical role of journalists as watchdogs emerged from the interviews, highlighting journalists’ responsibility for being critical of those in power and exposing wrongdoings among authorities and businesses, which is one of the dimensions identified by Mellado (2015). The interviewees noted that this means scrutinising the environmental impact of policies and exposing greenwashing, unsustainable businesses, and illegitimate decision-making processes – that is, journalistic ways of intervening.

The role of journalists as critical examiners of political and economic power was emphasised by the significance of following the money trail. “The environment is a gold mine for crooks”, as one journalist phrased it (S1). This sentiment was echoed by another informant, who mentioned how businesses jumped on the bandwagon when they realised there was money to be made in energy transition (I2). In Norway, for instance, this role perception was epitomised by monitoring the allocation of Norwegian tax funds to areas including rainforest conservation, carbon credit procurement, and the overseas operations of state-owned enterprises like Statkraft and Equinor (N1, N3).

Journalists highlighted the need to continuously fact-check during interviews with politicians and stakeholders to maintain a critical perspective on their agenda, while simultaneously educating and providing checks and balances. Thus, informing the public of upcoming projects before the decision and implementation stages is important (F3), and it raises awareness of the huge power imbalance when it comes to environmental issues. Journalists pointed out that often, a single individual tries to fight the engineering and legal departments of state and local institutions (I2).

When delineating the societal mission of environmental journalism, journalists frequently employed expressions such as “exposing objectionable conditions in society”. The topic is also so vast that it requires a more active search for stories than for many other beats. However, the lack of resources – for example, time needed for doing proper analysis, field work, and meeting people in remote parts of the country – poses limitations:

I wish there was more time for work. For example, going into the field. Travel and go to meet people in natural resorts in the provinces to do the kind of investigative journalism, dig in, and thoroughly familiarise [ourselves] with issues. And there is no... there is a constant lack of time, and the stories simply need to be done relatively quickly. (F5)

### **The role of sense-maker and educator**

In the third role, the journalists positioned themselves as mainly responsible for their audiences: the public. This can be connected to two of Mellado’s (2015) three dimensions. In her first dimension, the presence of the journalistic voice, a journalist can interpret news events – that is, be an educator. Her third dimension is the audience approach, whose constructed role fits well with service journalism to help audiences in their daily lives.

Within this role, a journalist actively intervenes, for instance, by interpreting news events. Across the countries, a perception of clarifying and being sense-making mediators of environmental issues was constructed in the data. The following citations, first from a Finnish and then an Icelandic journalist, illustrate this role:

I wish that they [readers] would understand biodiversity loss and climate change. I think that I have failed in my work if people do not understand these phenomena, their reasons, how bad the situation is, and how to influence it. So, I want that, in a way, people learn and understand these things. (F2)

In my opinion, there is a serious lack of knowledge among people about the context of things, mostly nature. [...] I think it is important that basic information about ecology and about climate, and the whole picture, be presented. (I2)

The role of sense-maker and educator manifested itself in various ways. Environmental news, particularly climate change, is complex. For example, the technical intricacies of climate change, reliance on scientific expertise, and its abstract character, with temporally and spatially distant consequences, make it difficult to understand and fully grasp. Journalists noted that complexity heightens their pivotal role as communicators and explainers; the task is to clarify, contextualise and make issues understandable, and ensure that they make sense on the level of people’s daily lives:

The journalist’s role is to make matters understandable. We need to be able to explain in a simple way so that people understand the greenhouse effect, carbon reduction, or climate neutrality. It is not easy to read Greek if you do

not know Greek. We cannot expect everyone to be interested in the climate issue. As a journalist, you can make it interesting by simplifying, being clear, and making it understandable. (S3)

The role of sense-maker and educator was also associated with journalism creating awareness about environmental issues. In other words, good environmental journalism is eye-opening, as it addresses issues that many are unaware of. Enhancing interest in environmental issues is needed, according to the interview data, to help people feel connected to and care about environmental issues in general and for their everyday choices. Journalism about environmental issues is hence partly about engaging people in them. For instance, a Norwegian journalist suggested that “making stories that can be engaging is almost more important than investigating things” (N2). Specifically, this journalist highlighted climate change as an issue that is temporally and spatially remote from many Norwegians; therefore, “it is insufficient to simply present information” to get audiences to “bother reading it”. Instead, an important task for journalists is to tell stories in novel ways, arousing the audience’s interest, enhancing their understanding, and bringing it closer to their lives.

Regarding the role of sense-maker and educator, journalists negotiate and balance whether they should pursue journalism that provides hope regarding climate change and the future of the planet. The thematic category of hope emerged as a reaction to the question of audience engagement. Interestingly, even though the journalists do not have a shared idea of how to engage with hope in journalism, pondering how the audience should be engaged does trigger them. While showing the severity of the situation, not giving false hope is also important.

In line with this argument, journalists feel responsible for increasing the public’s awareness about the severity of the situation: “to wake everyone up from their slumber, from apathy, for future generations and all species on the planet” (S4). Environmental journalism is, in this sense, considered a unique beat due to the scale and gravity of the issues. Journalists highlighted the societal importance of climate and environmental matters and described “the climate and nature crises” as the most critical issues of our time (N3). The need to make people understand the issues is also motivated by this argument:

My aim is to get people to understand with their entire emotional apparatus what climate change is and what it takes to reduce emissions... for me, that’s number one no matter what. (N2)

On the other hand, they noted that focusing on grim prospects cultivates a hopeless relation to the environment and decreases the audience’s interest in the news. Hence, journalists negotiate a balance between focusing on challenges and helping solve them. Within our data, this included delving into whether journalism’s role should encompass constructive aspects, such as providing advice, hope, and solutions (From & Kristensen, 2019). For instance, a Norwegian journalist argued that environmental journalism should be “constructive” (N5), while a Finnish journalist talked about “the principles of conciliatory journalism”

(F4). In addition to facilitating solutions, the roles of sense-maker and educator are motivated by the task of enhancing people's abilities to act on environmental issues and fostering an informed public debate in society, as formulated by a Finnish journalist:

Explaining the meanings of things can be approached at an individual level, where an environmental journalist can tell how much one person's everyday choices matter and what does not. There seems to be surprisingly much work to be done in this regard. (F3)

### **The role of environmental advocate**

The fourth role constructed in the data is that of an environmental advocate. Within this role, a central task for journalists is to act as supporters and spokespersons for nature, the environment, and future generations. Journalists present climate crises and nature crises as the most important issues of our time, being topics that should be covered "with full force". The role also includes the responsibility to take a stance for the common good, allowing journalists to actively bring environmental issues into the news agenda and promote discussion on them in society. The following quote demonstrates the arguments for advocating for the environment and the importance of environmental specialisation:

I have great individual responsibility since I am one of those who have a grasp of environmental importance, I must shoulder the responsibility to bring forward this perspective all the time and set the agenda as far as I can. (S4)

As portrayed within this role, the gravity of the current environmental situation calls for renegotiating the practices central to the ideal of objective news. The need to aim at balanced reporting of opposing views and being personally detached is questioned here:

I think maybe it's a bit more difficult to have a very "on the one hand, on the other hand" approach. You might become personally engaged, in a way. At least, I can feel that it's not indifferent. And I think that, in a way, it's allowed. (N1)

In this professional role, journalists actively discussed the boundaries between environmental journalism and activism. They conceptualised the demarcation as both clear and definite, as well as fluid and blurry. On the one hand, journalism differs from activism in terms of its aims – journalism provides information and investigates power, and in addition, it claims to be objective and balanced in terms of norms and methods. On the other hand, environmental journalism is arguably activism in the sense that it is about representing the interests of nature and future generations. Environmental journalism may come close to activism; it can enhance people's willingness and capabilities to act for the environment, as the quote below illustrates:

But that doesn't necessarily mean that we become activists... I think it's our role to use terms that are very loud or to take on a different role than what we otherwise do in journalism. But some people may feel the need to act because of the stories we create. I don't find that unnatural. At the same time, there's something about being able to ask critical questions in the other direction. To dare question some of what is perceived as "correct" in the context of climate. (N3)

Even though the boundary is fluid, the role of an environmental advocate does not allow for "crossing a line" concerning professional guidelines on facts and ethics, as emphasised by several journalists interviewed. For example, a journalist would not put forward statistics that are incorrect. The quote below from an Icelandic interviewee illustrates discussion of the boundary and how different practices are accepted accordingly:

As an activist, you are permitted to cross a certain line. When it comes to journalism, there are certain ethical guidelines and professional standards that you must adhere to which do not necessarily apply to activism. When you are an activist, you don't need to obey civilian laws and rules. We must do that. (I3)

However, the difference between environmental journalism and activism can be perceived as vague, because journalists choose an angle for each story. Some journalists already consider the choice to cover environmental issues as an activist decision – it implies a commitment to the cause, as the following quote illustrates:

When you choose to spend a lot of time on climate and environmental journalism and say that this is an important issue, if someone calls that an activist decision, I might not argue so hard against it. The topics you cover [...] will be influenced by your interests and what you believe is important in the world, right? And then the methodology you choose, and especially the presentation of the answers, should be as value-free as possible. But you have a starting point. I wouldn't have written about it if I didn't think that global climate change and the degradation of Norwegian nature were potentially problematic. (N4)

## Conclusion

Some scholars have suggested that in response to urgent global challenges, environmental journalists must move beyond objective reporting to intervene more directly to raise awareness and engagement among their audiences and to advocate for action (Brüggemann et al., 2020; Nelson, 2021). Our research, with 20 semi-structured interviews, delved into how journalism professionals in four Nordic countries perceive their roles in environmental reporting, analysing what roles are central and how the idea of intervening is justified within the roles. Our research shows that Nordic journalists believe their professional performance

encompasses various roles: objective news provider, critical watchdog, sense-maker and educator, and environmental advocate. The roles include a variety of (partially contradictory) tasks: disseminating topical information on the environment, acting as a critical watchdog, facilitating a civic function towards audiences, and actively intervening for the sake of the environment and nature.

Echoing the strong presence of the ideals of objectivity and autonomy within the Nordic journalism cultures (Ahva et al., 2017; Hovden & Välvirronen, 2021; Hujanen, 2016), the principle of objective news reporting plays an important role in environmental journalists' negotiations; other roles recognise and account for such objectivity. Our analysis thus supports the observation made in previous research (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021) that journalists' professional performance regarding environmental issues is about balancing journalistic objectivity and environmental advocacy.

Like several previous studies, our research indicates that the aims of intervention characterise all the analysed roles. Importantly, Nordic journalists seek not to intervene by taking sides, but by remaining professional, that is, intervening is conceptualised in ways that rely on the idea of being detached from interest groups and the practices of activism. The studied data illustrate that intervening is about setting the agenda, assessing and interpreting facts, raising awareness among audiences, and facilitating their grassroots engagement, or supporting and advocating certain actions and decisions about the environment but remaining formerly an "outsider" (see Brüggemann et al., 2020; Nelson, 2021). These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the idea of intervening in journalism that indicates an understanding of intervention neither as opposition to the detached dissemination of news nor as opinion-based journalism (Mellado et al., 2017; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Rather, within the context of complex environmental and climate issues, it can be seen as a complementary dimension of pursuing professionalism.

Intervening characterises the role of objective news provider via the aims of selecting sources and analysing data. Due to the complex and conflictual nature of environmental questions, ensuring professionalism through fact-checking, accuracy, and balance are important practices for avoiding further polarisation of public debate. The idea of false equivalence is criticised for giving voice to climate deniers and problematic viewpoints (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Instead, journalists stress the importance of creating "true balance" and the need for careful evaluation of what voices, facts, and opinions professional journalism can and should rely on.

Intervening characterises the role of sense-maker and educator from an audience perspective, reflecting the strong orientation of the Nordic news media towards their audiences. The studied journalists perceive their emerging role as containing the important tasks of educating people and making sense of environment-related information – in line with previous research (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). Within the role of sense-maker and educator, the aim of clarifying and making sense of inherently complex environmental issues is central, showing the gravity of the situation and the significance of people's everyday

actions. Intervening in the case of this role is thus about “opening eyes”, or creating awareness in society and engaging people in environmental issues on the level of their everyday lives.

Within the role of critical watchdog, intervening means investigating and advocating for environmental injustices and scrutinising business malpractices. Within the role of environmental advocate, journalists openly act as spokespersons for nature, the environment, and future generations. Previous research has found that many journalists take a critical stance towards the notion of environmental advocacy, viewing their role as objective and neutral (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). Within our study, the journalists differentiated between journalism and activism. They stressed the importance of following the code of journalism ethics by relying on facts, remaining detached, and not advocating specific environmental views or actions. While journalists did not view various methods of activism as possible, they positioned advocacy within the boundaries of journalism professionalism; it is allowed and it is about making visible the urgency and negative consequences of environmental problems, ensuring they receive the attention they deserve, fostering awareness and engagement. They thus constructed the role of advocate as a responsibility to intervene by promoting the common good and amplifying less powerful and voiceless actors and phenomena, such as nature and future generations, by proactively raising environmental issues to the public agenda.

The data offer in-depth insights into the roles Nordic journalists construct and how they make sense of intervening. Most interviewees were general journalists with extensive experience within the environmental beat. Respondents' experiences with multiple beats allowed them to reflect on reporter roles related to different topics. An obvious limitation of this study is, however, the limited number of interviews in each country for drawing general conclusions or comparing the countries.

While the roles analysed in this article characterise Nordic journalists' self-perceptions of their professional tasks regarding environmental issues and debates, individual journalists may perceive the roles and their importance differently. In other words, we are not claiming that the roles are shared by all interviewees; rather, while for some the role of sense-maker and educator was most central, others considered the role of environmental advocate more important. To answer the question of how Nordic journalists generally perceive their professional roles in environmental reporting, a quantitative survey among journalists would be needed. Moreover, future research should examine this question more closely against national media models and journalistic cultures to better assess how journalists' thinking is connected to them.

Another limitation of this study is the focus on journalists' perceptions of their roles instead of their practices or performance. Previous research has revealed a significant gap between journalistic role conceptions and role performance (e.g., Mellado & van Dalen, 2013). Future research could therefore focus on environmental issues by examining how journalists enact various roles in their professional work and how the ideas of intervening manifest, for example, in

work practices and journalistic products. Since journalism and climate reporting tend to prioritise elitist sources (Anderson, 2017), an important question to explore would be whom environmental journalists represent and give voice to as well as how “true balance” is textually constructed.

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