

How to get to know what we know

Introduction to the special issue, What do we Know about Media, Communication, Journalism, and Democracy in the Nordics?

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue, we discuss the reasons why it is difficult to orientate oneself about key results in research. Some general characteristics of research in humanities and social sciences are discussed as well as characteristics that are evident in research on media and communication. With this as a point of departure, we argue that scholars have a responsibility to support actors outside academia to acquire research-based knowledge. This must be done at an arm's-length distance, however. We argue that one way to fulfil this responsibility is to produce literature reviews with an ambition to provide a clear answer to the question "What do we know about...?" This special issue includes eight such reviews and it is a way for Nordicom to actively contribute to the supply of science-based knowledge in media policy processes in the Nordic countries.

KEYWORDS: academia policy relationships, journalism, literature reviews, media and communication, publishing patterns

It is not easy for anyone who wants to delve into a research area; getting an overview and orientating oneself on key theories and research results requires considerable effort. The abundance of published research, publishing patterns, and language barriers are just some examples of the obstacles one encounters when one wants to know what we know – especially in the humanities and social sciences.

The production of research and publications is, to put it mildly, overwhelming: In 2025, Scopus indexed about 25,000 journals from more than 7,000 publishers. For many years, the academic publishing landscape grew at a rather slow but steady pace – both in terms of the number of journals and the number of published articles. During the early 2000s, when digitalisation really started to take off, the annual growth rate accelerated (Johnson et al., 2018). PubMed, the leading database in life sciences and biomedicine, can serve as an example. Between 2006 and 2014, 10 million documents were indexed in the database, meaning it took about nine years to double the 10 million documents indexed between 1865 and 2006 (Hong & Pluye, 2018).

The number of indexed materials in PubMed is vast, but its size is still an advantage. In contrast to scholars in the social sciences and humanities, researchers in life sciences, as within other subfields of the natural sciences, can settle for one database when they search for research of high quality. If a result is out there and published in a serious journal, it can be found in one of the leading databases. This is not the case for scholars in the social sciences and humanities. In these areas, the number of databases is noticeably greater, and in most cases, they are specialised and cover only certain types of literature or certain types of research. Social Science Citation Index, for example, is primarily focused on articles from peer-reviewed journals, while Scopus has a wider scope and includes books but often lacks research published in languages other than English, and so on. To get an overview by searching one database is therefore impossible – one must search in several instances. Apart from being a fuss, it also creates difficulties to be consistent, as different databases have different principles for how they index publications (Young et al., 2002). The problem is linked to the publishing patterns in the social sciences, where the article format has gained popular status; however, books, reports, and a great deal of “grey” literature are still important formats for researchers. This also means that research in the social sciences and humanities is commonly published in languages other than English (Hicks, 2004).

Another aspect to take into consideration is that the topics of media and communication are studied in several disciplines, meaning a diversity in approaches and conceptualisations. This in turn is amplified by social scientists’ common passion for conceptual diversity. Such a fluidity isn’t necessarily an advantage for those who search for knowledge. The same phenomenon can be studied using several different concepts and the same concept can be used to study several phenomena, distinctions of great importance for scholars who know their concepts well, but an obstacle for those who want to grasp and get to know more. This variety is in turn part of a larger movement of increasing specialisation

and fragmentation, a tendency spanning disciplines and not necessarily a unique condition for humanities and social sciences. With regard to research in media and communication, there are very few things holding research together: no shared idea of what the study object is, no shared knowledge interest, no common theory that unites, nor are there any provocative issues that all media and communication scholars have a stake in. Few scholars consider themselves as contributors to a collective knowledge base. Even the name is contested, as neither “media” nor “communication” have been given generally accepted definitions (Waisbord, 2019).

The number of traditions is overwhelming, and rather than a discipline or a field, research on media and communication seems to be best described as a landscape with locally anchored communities (Craig, 1999). Scholars within these communities interact extensively with each other, but very few have contact with researchers in other communities. There are very few references crossing the borders of the communities; instead, it seems to be more natural to search for inspiration among scholars in other subject fields studying similar matters. The probability of a scholar studying media effects giving reference to research in psychology is extensively higher than the probability that they will give reference to research on fandom. And the argument goes the other way around. There are few studies on fandom referring to the massive bulk of research on media effects, if it isn't to criticise that kind of research.

The specialisation and the diversity are by no means something new and not necessarily something unique for media and communication research. Most areas in the social sciences seem to work under similar conditions. Some would argue that it is more accented in our field, however (Donsbach, 2006; Waisbord, 2019). Some would also argue that it is problematic and needs correction. The lack of unity and the high level of specialisation risks undermining the legitimacy of research on media and communication. According to Tunstall (1983), fragmentation is a signal of low quality. Couldry (2013) has also highlighted the need for some coherence, but according to him, the risk of low quality isn't due to fragmentation but the lack of identity that comes if there are no borders demarcating other research fields. Corner (2013), on the other hand, argued that the diversity and lack of coherence and obvious borders to other areas, rather than being a problem, is a situation that must be accepted. Waisbord (2019) took it even further and argued that fragmentation and diversity are expressions of strength, primarily because it shows that scholars studying media and communication have demonstrated abilities to incorporate theories from other fields and adapt their research to the changing media and communication landscape.

Whether the diversity of media and communication research is a weakness or a strength is open to debate. But the idea that there are any initiatives that can do anything about it should be seen as wishful thinking. The differences of opinion about what is at the heart of the subject and how to best study media and communication are, in some cases, abysmal, and will almost certainly persist. Similarly, it is hard to see that there will be any major changes in the publishing

patterns of researchers, the design of databases, or the range of journals available. So, rather than spending time trying to solve a number of intractable problems – if they are problems at all – there is a need to find ways to enable researchers and others to orientate themselves and more easily find what they are looking for in the research landscape as it stands.

Literature reviews to handle abundances

Producing literature reviews is hardly something new, but it is a way of coping with the abundance of research and making it easier for researchers and others to orientate themselves. Literature reviews serve as a tool to create some order in the clutter and they make it possible to get an overview of, for example, research on a phenomenon, a research question, or the use of a method. They can also provide insights into, for example, publication and citation patterns, dominant theories, or cross-fertilisation between disciplines or research areas (George et al., 2023). In short, a literature review can be described as a synthesis, summary, analysis, comment, and critique of existing research. As such, it is considered to be secondary research where primary studies is the unit of analysis (Hong & Pluye, 2018).

The type of literature review that many social scientists are familiar with is the one that presents a general knowledge overview. We encounter it in essays and theses, but also in articles. It often has a broad approach and is rarely based on a clear question. The ambition is rather to present a set of texts that have guided the author's work in various ways; therefore, it is rarely systematic in terms of selection, appraisal, or synthesis (Pope et al., 2007). It is a type of review that has been rightly criticised for being subjective, unreliable, and inadequate if the goal is to say something dependable about the state of knowledge.

In the natural sciences, the systematic literature review has long been the dominant method. It was established as a “golden standard” in the 1970s within the evidence-based movement, which was initially based on the basic idea that science should support professions and inform policy development – or, as Sackett and his colleagues pointed out (1996: 71), a movement that advocates the “conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients”. This is an instrumental view of both research and the relationship between research and society.

One consequence of the focus on systematic reviews is that literature reviews have been closely associated with quantitative research for a long time. Simply, this is because numerical results could be easily compared and synthesised, but also because quantitative research and the search for general patterns were in line with the interest in knowledge that characterised and characterises research that strives to find evidence. Thus, other groups distanced themselves from the use of reviews, as they were considered to be limited (Young et al., 2002). In response to broader knowledge claims made by social scientists, methods for other types of literature reviews were gradually developed, a process not only focusing on research methods but also on the relationship between research

and society, promoting distant and indirect connection. Some early examples are meta-ethnographies (Noblit & Hare, 1988) and meta-syntheses (Jensen & Allen, 1996).

Today, the literature review is an established type of analysis in the social sciences as well, and over time, it has become a recurring feature in journals and elsewhere. This development needs to be seen in the light of the fact that the amount of research published has increased dramatically, but also that the methods and approaches used to do reviews have evolved and that there are now several approaches that are adapted to different types of research. It should also be emphasised that the development of methods is a result of literature reviews being used to a greater extent for purposes other than producing “evidence”. The evidence-based type of review is still common and probably the dominant type, but researchers now use literature reviews for much broader aims, including the synthesising of empirical as well as theoretical work, developing theories and concepts, and identifying gaps in a research area (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Nordicom’s motifs

Nordicom’s mission is to develop and disseminate science-based knowledge about journalism, media, and communication. An important part of this work is to strengthen the conditions for democracy, freedom of expression, and independent media in the Nordic region. This means that in addition to serving as a platform for researchers studying the conditions for media and communication, we also work actively to support actors outside academia with research-based knowledge. This work is expressed in studies, analyses, and statistics, but above all by the publication of books, *Nordicom Review*, and reports. We place great emphasis on outreach work, and it is an important part of how we prioritise between projects, even though it is always the scientific qualities that determine what we publish. The conceptual model that underpins our outreach work is that, as an independent academic institution, we must operate at an arm’s-length distance from politics, industry, and special interests. This means that we cherish our ability to decide for ourselves which projects to pursue, which texts to publish, and that what we publish should be peer-reviewed. When we approach politics and business, we do so with restraint.

The relationship between science and policy is sometimes assumed to be linear. This idea is, for instance, one of the distinctive characteristics of the evidence-based movement mentioned above. It is an idea based on the assumption that science can produce incontrovertible knowledge that can guide politics and business or respond to the problems faced by politics and business. It is an instrumental view that links research and stakeholders in an unfortunate way. It is also an approach that ignores the fact that much of what happens in politics and business is shaped and coloured by conflict, ideological considerations, and compromise, rather than rational decision-making (Young et al., 2002). That is, even if science can produce unambiguous answers, decisions in politics and business will still be shaped by ideological and economic considerations.

To be guided by political or economic considerations is unfortunate, especially for an institution that is supposed to safeguard scientific independence and the functioning of the democratic system. Rather, it is our task to maintain distance and – instead of responding to politicians’ and the industry’s search for answers to current issues – shed light on the circumstances that shape the conditions for journalism, media, and communication in its broadest sense. Such an approach means that what is published by Nordicom, rather than offering solutions to individual problems, offers perspectives and broader analysis of media and communication. In this way, we can provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of the media and communication landscape. In addition, it is an approach that enables us to support actors in politics and business to distance themselves from what might otherwise be taken for granted, which then increases their opportunities to question the status quo. So, rather than offering solutions to immediate problems through models and predictions, our approach is aimed at the creation of spaces where research can offer better understandings and critical analyses of established practices, norms, and ideas (Wenzel et al., 2025).

The work on this special issue of *Nordicom Review* should be seen in the light of these considerations. Our ambition with the issue is to make it easier for researchers and others to find and utilise research results. In this way, we seek to actively contribute to the supply of science-based knowledge in media policy processes in the Nordic countries. Nordicom has a unique position at the interface of academia, industry, and politics, and between Nordic and international levels. Our activities and publications, such as this special issue, thereby aim at strengthening and highlighting Nordic perspectives in international media research. As a publicly funded organisation, we strive to continuously develop and find new ways of working. This special issue is an expression of how we want to nourish that position.

Rather than focusing on a single topic, as is common in special issues, we have chosen to focus on one type of article – literature reviews. To assist readers and make the content more accessible, we have asked the authors to explicitly answer the question: “What do we know about...?” That is, our ambition is that the reviews should result in a clear answer to that question. In addition to this, our call focused on topics related to media, communication, journalism, and democracy in the Nordics. In the light of recent developments in media systems, the conditions for media production, the developments of communication technologies, as well as value transformations in the citizenry this is a timely question.

Eight articles addressing what we know about media, communication, journalism, and democracy in the Nordics

Eight articles are included in this issue. In the first, “Conceptualisations and analyses of distrust and mistrust in news media: Reviewing research from a decade of distrust”, Peter Jakobsson and Fredrik Stiernstedt survey what we know about distrust towards news media and journalism. The topic has gained

increased attention due to a slow but significant decrease in trust at the same time as political disinformation has raised and become common in digital networks and elsewhere. In their article, Jakobsson and Stiernstedt include 112 articles published between 2012 and 2024 in 18 international journals in media, communication, cultural studies, and journalism. As in most cases when it comes to widely spread concepts in the social sciences, the conceptual diversity is large, and the fact that the concept is used in everyday life doesn't contribute to its clarification. Consequently, the meaning of trust, distrust, and mistrust as they are used in research is hard to capture. That said, the review points out some key answers to the overall question of what we know about distrust and news media. One finding is that there is no clear evidence for the assumption that distrust leads to news avoidance and lowered political engagement, as there are studies showing that distrust also fosters consumption guided by a critical stance and increased political engagement. Another is that previous research can't show a straightforward correlation between distrust in the media and democracy. There is a relation, but it is complex and not necessarily straightforward.

In the second article, "The political uses of the past in Nordic media discourses: An integrative systematic literature review", Manuel Menke collects research studying how history is used by memory agents and institutions in varying media contexts. The review collects 47 studies covering a multitude of media formats including online communication, journalism, film, television, and documentaries. Among other things, it shows that the past is a key feature in political discourse and that these elements serve as a reference when current affairs are evaluated. The histories are seldom anchored in national contexts, meaning that the negotiations of their meanings are influenced by a diverse set of interests, leading to fluid and inconsistent meanings and usages. Accordingly, the past becomes politicised in relation to today's positions and used in two ways, first as a form of rhetoric to persuade those who aren't knowledgeable about the histories' trajectory and second to disrupt hegemonic discourses.

The third article also focuses on media discourses, at least partly. In "Audiovisual fiction and democracy: A systematic literature review", Jono Van Belle and her colleagues examine what we know about the connection between audiovisual fiction and democracy. In their review, they map out how democracy has been conceptualised and what relationships between politics, fiction, and audiences scholars have investigated. One of their conclusions is that research commonly takes liberal democracy for granted; few scholars make the effort to investigate other forms of democracy. They also show that the most common way to investigate politics and fiction is to study the extent to which and in what ways fiction affects audiences' opinions, attitudes, and behaviours, or to what degree fiction contributes to the construction of political identities and belongings. In this context, one of the key results is that audiences negotiate fictional content in relation to broader societal issues and that the amount of consumption, media repertoires, social resources, and personal dispositions are mediating factors – but also that fictional content isn't unilateral in its influence. It can increase but also decrease political trust and engagement and accordingly

foster engagement as well as resignation. Less interest has been shown regarding politics and the production of fiction. One exception is the relatively large number of studies investigating Nordic Noir. In these studies, the political context is frequently made explicit.

Aske Kammer and his colleagues turn their focus to the production of news and how it has been affected by datafication in the fourth article. In “Datafied news work: A scoping literature review”, they put together 20 years of research on how digital data is collected and used in the news industry. Their point of departure is that data is a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that moves across spaces of news work. They identify five spaces: content production, content distribution, content monetisation, management, and spaces beyond the individual media organisation. Data is adapted and made fit for each context, and accordingly, datafied news work rests on a variety of data types. There are commonalities, however, and some data features are robust enough to maintain a common identity across spaces, one of them is that data is seen as a resource. Accordingly, audience measurements are vital for news production, monitoring, and post-production, whereas data structuring is vital in news organisations’ ambitions to distance themselves from platforms to gain advertising revenue. Taken together, it becomes obvious that Nordic news organisations actively struggle to gain autonomy but at the same time integrate data from other sources in their work.

The following article, “Journalistic practice in times of crisis: A scoping review of role shifts and challenges tied to news production under extraordinary conditions”, by Rebecca Bengtsson Lundin and Erika Walukiewicz, also focuses on news production, but under very certain conditions. Their interest is what we know about journalistic roles and how they are negotiated during crises. The background is the challenges manifested when journalists are about to cover disrupting events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the terror attack in Utøya, Norway, and the Jokela school shooting in Finland. The review includes 32 studies between 2007–2024, and some of the key challenges uncovered in previous research are the need to balance between roles, navigate ethical dilemmas, and to an increasing degree deal with social media. A key result is that journalists tend to prioritise information dissemination rather than critical scrutiny, at least in the acute phase. Innovation and adaptation to technological developments is another key feature during crises. Apart from changing work patterns, they also raise ethical challenges, for instance, how journalists should approach those affected by a crisis. Finally, the review shows that Nordic media organisations have the ability to create resilience and adaptability even when society is under sustained stress.

Niko Pyrhönen and Kaisa Tiisanen have made the next review, “Religion, media, and democracy in the Nordic countries: A scoping review of empirical research 2011–2024”. Their overview builds on 46 studies published between 2011 and 2024, and the overview shows that scholars have primarily focused on institutional discourses. More recently, however, digital platforms and non-institutional actors have been given attention, even if there is a lack systematic

research of these spaces. Based on the research done, it is evident that a regular theme in Nordic media discourses on religion is Islam and Muslim minorities, often with connection to conflicts, tensions, or securitisation. Commonly, research focuses on how media avoid the complexity related to religion and how tensions between democratic ideals – for instance, freedom of religion and freedom of speech – are reproduced.

Even if scholars have only recently started to study the connections between digital media, democracy, and religion, the connection between digital communication and democracy in general terms has been a frequent research theme. This is evident in the seventh article by Ib T. Gulbrandsen and Sine N. Just, “What do we know about digital public debate? Technological affordances and democratic dilemmas”. The point of departure for their analyses is how digital platforms have become core arenas for public debate and how this has changed the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions. They establish a typology founded on a distinction between two directions of participation – bottom-up and top-down – and three types of participation: human-centric, issue-centric, and technology-centric. In their overview, they illustrate how the six types of participation play out as shown in previous empirical research. Based on the review, they conclude that human-centric participation flourishes across topics and interests, but when self-organised interaction overlaps with debates organised by institutional actors, it seems to be more problematic. Bottom-up and top-down debates about similar issues play out differently and often clash. This pattern is sustained in research based on issue-centric approaches. Technology-centric research takes these tensions even further and shows the most pessimistic view on the potential for digital public debate with regards to democracy. Accordingly, it shows that invitations to participate must change to support democratic ends to a larger extent. The overall conclusion is then that established patterns in digital debates nurture decreasing institutional trust.

The last article, “Mapping research on disinformation and misinformation across the Nordic countries: An integrative review”, is written by Hilkka Grahn and her colleagues. Examining how dis- and misinformation have been studied in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden between 2014 and 2024, the authors collected 359 studies and identified five main topics in the literature: security; media and fact-checking; health; media literacy; and social media. They also note that many studies are made by scholars from other disciplines, underlining that media and communication research is hard to delimit to certain academic contexts. One of the key results is that mis- and disinformation is hard to capture, given the conceptual diversity but also because of social, political, and technological differences. It is also evident that research is very much a response to an acute situation in society, as current events have had extensive influence over research. For instance, while relatively few studies were published before 2017, the number of studies has grown steadily, with the 2016 American election, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine as driving forces.

Taken together, the eight articles included in this special issue reflect much of what is discussed above. They all refer to a large number of studies published

in different formats and in different disciplines. Most scholars have limited themselves to research presented in English, but it is evident that much research is produced in the Nordic languages as well. With the contributors' efforts to search, summarise, synthesise, analyse, and comment on these materials, all eight articles provide well-substantiated answers to the question: What do we know about media, communication, journalism, and democracy in the Nordics? Thereby, they have also shown that we as scholars have an important role to fill with regard to society's knowledge needs. Without doubt, it is evidently so that the Nordic countries encounter social, political, economic, and technological challenges. To be able to deal with them, actors in politics, business, and civil society need knowledge. The overviews included in this issue show that scholars can act as mediators between research and society, not necessarily as providers of the correct answers, but rather as providers of substantiated knowledge. As such, they can help actors get a broader and better understanding of the matters they encounter – and hopefully help them make better decisions.

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