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A NEOLIBERAL MEDIA WELFARE STATE? THE SWEDISH MEDIA SYSTEM IN TRANSFORMATION

Peter Jakobsson , Johan Lindell  and Fredrik Stiernstedt 

The concept of the Media Welfare State describes Nordic specificity in how media are organised and how they serve a lively and inclusive democracy. This article engages in a dialogue in regards to the contention that this media system has persisted in the midst of rapid social change. We synthesise previous research and documented changes in media policy in Sweden, covering the last three decades, to show the ways in which the Swedish media system has undergone significant transformations. Media use is becoming more polarised and connected to social class. The state is retreating from its involvement in media policy; consequently, the press and public service media are facing unprecedented challenges. Finally, the “consensual” relation between media companies and the state, which is said to be typical for the media welfare state, no longer characterises the media market. While some of the features of the media welfare state system remain in Sweden, the current media system is best characterised as a neoliberal media welfare state. The article discusses tensions and conflicts in the existing model and possible future developments.

KEYWORDS media systems; Nordic media; media policy; the media welfare state; neoliberalism; welfare state

Introduction

The Nordic countries have long been understood as outliers in Europe (West Pederesen and Kuhnle 2017). A strong social-democratic welfare state, egalitarian values, secularism, and individualism coupled with high levels of social trust, among other things, have contributed to this Nordic exceptionalism (Greve 2007). In relation to media and communication, Syvertsen et al. (2014) coined the term the “media welfare state” (MWS) to describe the specificities of the Nordic media systems and how they were responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing global media landscape. The concept of the MWS opens for a systematic and theoretically grounded discussion on the role of the media in society. At the same time, as a normative concept, it gives us indicators with which the shape and form of “actually existing” national media landscapes can be evaluated and critically assessed. One of Syvertsen et al.’s (2014) main claims is that while the MWS is challenged by the pressures of globalisation, increased competition on the media market, and the slow retreat of the state in the media sector, its principles are to a “large degree reaffirmed, sustained and strengthened in the digital era” (2014, 2). Their conclusion is thus ambivalent—even though it is transforming, the MWS remains intact. This article engages in dialogue

with that contention, and introduces the concept of the *neoliberal media welfare state*, in order to move the discussion on the Nordic media system further.

During the last few decades, the specific social-democratic welfare state, typical of the Nordic countries (Esping-Andersen 1990), has undergone immense changes. Many of its key institutions and mechanisms remain, but their redistributive effects have been weakened and their ideological framing has shifted in favour of justice over equality. Moreover, there is a shift toward stressing the responsibility of the individual over the social responsibilities of the state. Other key elements, such as a public-school system and de-commodified healthcare have been opened to private capital investments and market competition. Furthermore, progressive taxing and systems for economic redistribution have been significantly weakened (Piketty 2020). The Nordic welfare state, thus, has changed to such a degree that it can be characterised as a post- or neoliberal welfare state (Baeten, Lawrence and Lund Hansen 2015). Welfare state retrenchment has been more far-reaching in Sweden than in the neighbouring countries. According to the latest available comparable data, no other country in the OECD has seen a faster increase in inequality since the 1980s (Therborn 2020), and policies such as tax breaks for the wealthy and “free choice” in public goods such as education are more developed in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries (Green-Pedersen 2002).

It is against this backdrop that we turn to the transformation of the MWS and take Sweden as our case. Through a review of previous research dealing with various aspects of the Swedish media landscape during the last thirty years, we seek to initiate a critical discussion on the status of the MWS by asking the basic question: what is the status of the MWS-model in Sweden today? We answer this question by analysing the consequences that neoliberal policies and welfare retrenchment have had, both for the Swedish society at large and more specifically for its media system. We propose *the neoliberal media welfare state* as the concept through which to conceptualise the nature of these changes.

The Media Welfare State

The endeavour to classify media systems—broadly defined as the socio-political makeup of various media institutions and their functioning in society—is not new (see e.g. Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956; Christians et al. 2010). A seminal contribution presented a three-part classification of media systems in Western democracies: the liberal, the polarised-pluralist, and the democratic-corporatist models (Hallin and Mancini 2004). For Hallin and Mancini, the Nordic countries were the most clear-cut examples of the democratic-corporatist system. Other researchers have asked if the Nordic media system could be framed as an altogether separate media system (e.g. Castells and Himanen 2002) while many have emphasised Nordic similarity and correspondence with Hallin and Mancini’s democratic-corporatist model (Strömbäck, Ørsten, and Aalberg 2008). Nord argued, however, that the Nordic media systems are “variations of a mixture of democratic corporatist national structures [with] more external liberal influences” (2008, 109). Ohlsson’s (2015) study on the Nordic media market ended up in a similar vein, showing that the Nordic countries were transitioning toward the liberal model.

Regarding efforts to delineate a specific Nordic media system, it is Syvertsen et al.’s (2014) *The Media Welfare State* that has received the most attention. It departs from other attempts to classify Nordic media systems, in that it stands by the claim that there is, in fact,

a distinct Nordic media system, and that this system tends to persist in the midst of change. However, the authors suggest that their conclusions regarding the MWS are tentative and that more research is needed.

The MWS rests on four “pillars” (Syvertsen et al. 2014). Although these are not unique to the Nordic countries, they are claimed to be more developed in the Nordic system than elsewhere.

1. The communication services in the community are organised in a way that ensures their character as “public assets”. Extensive subsidies exist and requirements are set for universal access (e.g. broadband expansion, public service media).
2. Long-standing regulation exists to ensure freedom of the press, editorial freedom, and professional autonomy in the media industry and in the journalist corps.
3. Media policy is regarded as part of cultural policy, which implies that demands are placed on companies and organisations, and that support (film support, press support, etc.) is distributed to ensure diversity and quality in the media’s offerings.
4. Media policy has achieved long-term sustainability through consensus-based agreements, dialogue, and collaboration between the state, the media industry, and the public. (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

These pillars are said to connect to the Nordic—social democratic—welfare state model more generally. This model differs from other corporativist systems and welfare states (Germany and France, for example), in that egalitarianism and universalism have been its general ideological underpinnings, and that the welfare system in this respect had a transformative agenda (Esping-Andersen 1990). The intention was to “enroll everybody in the same social security and welfare state provisions, which encourage participation and inclusion of all citizens in the political and cultural public spheres” (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 7).

The outcomes of the policy pillars and of the Nordic welfare policies on media and culture are traced to four specific areas: media use, the press, public service media, and the commercial media companies (Syvertsen et al. 2014). As for media consumption, Syvertsen et al. identify: high consumption of journalistic outputs; high levels of trust in the media; almost universal access to high-speed internet; and small differences in media use, based on class, gender, and ethnicity. With regard to the press, they map out the strong systems for freedom of the press, press support, and the high circulation and high number of available newspapers (in print and online). Furthermore, they highlight the strong public service institutions in the Nordic countries, which are well-funded and reach large audiences, while having an adaptive approach to digital developments as well as to other challenges, for example, in reaching younger audiences on new platforms. Finally, they highlight the specificity of the relationship between the media companies and the state, where cooperation and consensus rather than conflict have prevailed.

While this model has inspired work on the peculiarities and persisting virtues of the Nordic media system (see e.g. Kammer 2016; Benson, Powers, and Neff 2017), it is not without critique (see e.g. Ala-Fossi 2020). Picard (2015) has pointed out that Syvertsen and colleagues failed to include comparative elements that could confirm Nordic exceptionalism in the media sector, and that they downplayed neoliberal changes that have impacted the principles of the MWS. Four years after the publication of *The Media Welfare State*, Enli, Syvertsen, and Mjøs (2018) initiated a discussion on such changes and suggested that “it is worth asking to what degree Scandinavian media and communications remain distinct” (2018, 614).

We seek to add to this ongoing discussion, not by focusing on the relative success of the Nordic media system in relation to other countries, but in following up on Enli, Syvertsen, and Mjøs's (2018) question. Specifically, we focus on the societal and media related changes that have taken place within a Nordic country during the last few decades. These changes can be placed within the framework of neoliberalism.

We already noted that previous research has argued that the Nordic media system is converging with the liberal model (Ohlsson 2015). We believe, however, that conceptualisation of the Swedish media system through the lens of neoliberalism adds important nuance to the analysis of systemic change. Indeed, Hallin & Mancini argued that the liberal model often is treated as more coherent than it is (2004, 198). Thus, the media systems in the US and the UK are distinct from each other in a number of ways. Furthermore, the features that unite the countries that fall under Hallin & Mancini's liberal model says relatively little about the specific developments that the MWS has undergone in the last decades.

There are a number of theoretical frameworks that have been employed in critical research on neoliberalism, which are of interest to us (Callison and Manfredi 2020). First, critical political-economic theories have highlighted economic policies such as privatisation, financialisation, and accumulation by dispossession and analysed how these policies have fundamentally changed the nature and the functioning of welfare states (Harvey 2005). These policies have also affected the social landscape in Sweden, creating increasing levels of economic inequality (Therborn 2020), which have had an effect on issues such as media access, use and participation. We also discuss how economic policies have affected the Swedish media market in more direct terms, through increasing de-regulation and marketisation and through a one-sided focus on "competition policy" over "cultural policy." Secondly, innovations in governance structures and methods of governing, such as New Public Management (NPM) have affected the MWS. Public service media in Sweden (as elsewhere) have transformed in such a way that the organisations themselves are becoming more similar to other media companies. This implies that one function of public service media in Sweden is to sustain market relations in the media sector (rather than to counteract them) which is typical for how neoliberal policies have transformed central functions of the state (Birch and Siemiatycki 2016). Third, anthropological research on neoliberalism has highlighted the ideological beliefs and worldviews associated with neoliberalism (Gill 2008), e.g. individualism and the mistrust toward public institutions and state agencies, which is a development we discuss in relation to media audiences and the governance structures surrounding public service media.

The Transformation of the Swedish Media System

We now turn to the status of the MWS in Sweden today. We do so by reviewing previous research and secondary sources in relation to the four areas wherein the MWS is manifested (as detailed in the previous section) (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

Media Use

In terms of media use, the existence of a MWS should imply at least three things (Syvertsen et al. 2014). First, access to information and communication infrastructures

such as broadband should not be limited to the few, but be available for all citizens. Secondly, a MWS should encourage citizens' use of media in order to exercise their democratic rights and to participate in the wider society. Third, media use should follow egalitarian patterns creating common frames of reference.

In terms of media access, Sweden has managed to maintain and extend the spirit of MWS in the digital era. The latest Swedish survey within the World Internet Project, covering Swedes above the age of 11, shows that 98 per cent of all households had access to the internet, 93 per cent of all households had access to a computer, tablets were found in 70 per cent of all households, and 92 per cent owned a smartphone (Svenskarna och Internet 2019). However, different peoples' use of technology sheds light on existing inequalities. Danielsson's (2014) case study on young men in Sweden illustrates how digital media practice is embedded in wider symbolic struggles and boundary-drawings between social classes. Young men from working-class homes are less likely to approach various media as instruments for participating in civic life compared to middle-class boys. Related patterns extend to the national level, as levels of digital connectivity, appreciation of public service media, news interest, and tastes for various programmes and media contents vary between different socio-economic groups (Lindell and Hovden 2018). Despite policy-led ambitions to create an "information society for all citizens" (The Swedish Government 2000), there are reasons to doubt that contemporary media use follows egalitarian patterns. While individual variations and media preferences do not go against the notion of the MWS per se, systematic, class-based, tastes and orientations do. Over time, the increasing income inequalities and concentration of capital in Sweden, which is the effect of neoliberal economic policies (Piketty 2020), as well as the increased class-bound nature of media preferences, risk creating "islandification" effects, where people from similar social positions populate more or less isolated "social islands" whose boundaries are reinforced by class-distinct lifestyles, political opinions, and media consumption patterns (Lindell and Hovden 2018).

The reach of the printed press has dropped dramatically in recent years (Ohlsson 2015, 34); it is still true, however, that trust in the media and overall news consumption are at relatively high levels in Sweden (Andersson 2018). Nonetheless, recent research pinpoints a downward trend during the last few decades. Andersson and Weibull (2018) observe that levels of trust in the media have widened between different social groups since the early 2000s, particularly between people on the political right (lower trust) and the left (higher trust). A recent report from the Swedish Media Council unveils differences in the levels of trust in media between children of immigrants and children whose parents were born in Sweden, and between children of parents with high and low socio-economic status (The Swedish Media Council 2019). Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata (2013) show that the share of both "news avoiders" and "news seekers" in the Swedish population has grown since the 1980s, and that people's level of political interest has become an increasingly important predictor for news consumption. Additionally, a study covering the years between 2000 and 2016 shows that socio-economic status plays an increasingly prevalent role in explaining readership of morning papers (class differences in television viewing and tabloid news consumption, however, have lessened) (Bergström, Strömbäck, and Arkhede 2019). Today, class differences are reflected in the choice of various news outlets and genres (Ohlsson, Lindell, and Arkhede 2017). News consumption—an important tenet of the MWS because of its central role in enhancing "cultural involvement and participation" (Syvertsen et al. 2014)—is increasingly polarised between news avoiders and news seekers,

between the relatively privileged and those less well-off. Moreover, age differences in news consumption are bigger in Sweden than in other European countries (Robinson 2016).

During the last few decades, the neoliberalisation of Swedish society and the subsequent widening of class differences, along with changes in the media landscape (including globalisation, media de-regulation, and digitalisation) have led to the exacerbation of inequalities in media use and trust. While many Swedes enjoy wide-encompassing communicative infrastructures and access to the latest media technologies, the common frames of reference risk evaporating under the pressure of increasing audience fragmentation.

The Press

Historically, the printed press has played a crucial role in rendering the Nordic countries open, democratic, societies (Syvertsen et al. 2014). The press in these countries has enjoyed high numbers in readership (across the population). The countries have enjoyed a flourishing local press (at least historically, see below), and a particularly strong tradition of institutionalised self-regulation, as well as a long history of press freedom (Weibull and Jönsson 2007). Sweden is currently ranked as number four in the World Press Freedom Index 2020 (following Norway, Finland, and Denmark).

The role of the MWS in relation to the press is to juridically uphold and officially support and defend the freedom of the press, as well as other policies, such as securing the confidentiality of sources. Besides this, press subsidies are also important features of the MWS. Subsidies for the media sector are not unique to the Nordic countries; on the contrary—they can be found in most democratic countries, mainly in the form of indirect subsidies (such as tax reliefs) but also in the shape of direct funding (Nielsen and Linnebank 2011). The specificity of the MWS consists of the extent of such subsidies, which are much higher in the Nordic countries, and the fact that the share of direct subsidies is larger than in most other countries in the world (Nielsen and Linnebank 2011). This section, however, will demonstrate how the reshaping of the press subsidies can be seen as a development toward a *neoliberal media welfare state*. While the MWS remains relatively intact, its intentions, rationales, and effects have been reshaped in line with neoliberal principles.

The history of direct press subsidies in Sweden begins in the 1960s; however, it was after the large public investigation on the press (1972) that the press subsidies got their final shape and form. This happened parallel to the first cohesive cultural policy laid out in the early 1970s—a social-democratic welfare policy with far-reaching goals for a “cultural welfare” of Swedish citizens. This policy, following decades of welfare reforms, was described as the “icing on the cake” in the welfare state or as the “last building brick in the People’s Home” (Folkhemmet) (Frenander 2005). The idea of press subsidies followed a logic similar to the cultural policy within the welfare state regime—the motivation for direct press subsidies was “cultural” rather than market-oriented. Democratic debate, free opinion formation, and pluralism in content and ideas were the main driving forces behind the policy (SOU 1974, 102, 13).

The original press subsidies followed a logic that coupled the overarching goals of the policy with the question of economic power and redistribution. The subsidy system was designed to create plurality, both in content and in ownership. The economic (ownership) and symbolic (diversity in content and perspectives) power dimensions were clearly separated in the policy, and the understanding of their interrelation was a precondition for

the design of the subsidy system (Lantz 2012). Secondly, the funding of the subsidy system was in part accomplished by a new tax on advertising revenues; hence, capital from the rich newspapers was redistributed to the poorer newspapers through state intervention, following a recurring pattern in most policy areas in a social-democratic welfare regime (Engblom, Jonsson, and Gustafsson 2002).

As shown by Lantz (2012), the overarching principles and “keywords” for this regulation have in general stayed intact since the 1960s, but their meanings were slowly altered during the 1980s and 1990s. The interrelation between the economic and symbolic power eroded in policy—the focus on the “editorial plurality,” (i.e. more than one owner and editorial office in each major city) shifted to a vaguer notion of a “plurality of ideas”. This implied that ownership and organisation became less relevant and that large conglomerates could also be beneficiaries of the subsidies, if they produced different “brands” or varieties of titles. Also, the notion of a pluralism in content and ideas gradually became less important as a driving force behind the policy. In 1995, it was minimised to the phrase “vital opinion formation” (SOU 1995, 37, 155), which is clearly weaker compared to the 1972 version that included (the somewhat overlapping): variety and multitude of perspectives, free opinion formation, wider and more plural debate, diversity of opinions, and news stories.

The press subsidy system was questioned for a long time, not only by right-wing politicians, but also by the European Commission and The Swedish Competition Agency. According to their logic, the system represented an unfair support that undermined competition and blocked necessary structural transformations of the industry. In 2018, the last in a long series of modifications of the system was realised under the label “media subsidies.” Beyond the new platform neutrality (the fact that not only the printed press can be given subsidies), the idea of plurality and competition was abandoned, mainly due to the fact that a few larger newspaper corporations already controlled most of the market (SOU 2016, 80). What remains of the motivation for media subsidies are merely to strengthen the citizens’ possibilities to access “independent journalism”, and furthermore to make it possible for “themselves [the citizens] [to] contribute to a variety of perspectives in a broad public debate” (SOU 2016, 80, 320). The purpose of the subsidies, then, is to support a market for journalism as such, rather than to intervene in the functioning of this market. The role of the state, in line with a neoliberal policy shift, was reduced to ensuring that a functioning market existed, while cultural goals of diversity and pluralism were sidelined.

Public Service Media

Strong public service organisations are not unique for the Nordic countries, although Syvertsen et al. (2014) give them a central place in their conceptualisation of the MWS. Like in many other countries, the Swedish public service media adopted its mission statement from the BBC: to inform, educate, and entertain (Bolin 2013). Other guiding principles for public service media include universal access, pluralism, and independence. In its traditional form, public service broadcasting also played a part in the development of the democratic welfare state in at least two ways. First, it avoided the tendency to simply “give the audience what it wants”, and took the authoritative role of guiding and directing the public. Secondly, its role was not only about providing access to informative and educational material, but also to contribute to social cohesion by providing a space where citizens would gather (Blumler 1991).

The traditional role of public service media has however been challenged in a number of ways, for example, the shift to digital platforms and narrowcasting which challenges appeals to universality (Debrett 2009; Syvertsen et al. 2014). Another shift includes the changes in the production practices and management strategies of public service media, and the consequences that these have had for the output of the public service broadcasters. Below we discuss this latter shift in relation to neoliberalism.

Scholars have observed an increasingly symbiotic relationship between public and private broadcasters and production companies in many countries (Raats and Pauwels 2013). In line with this development public service policy in Sweden has since the 1990s stressed that the best way to ensure pluralism and diversity is to involve external actors in the production of content for public service broadcasting. One reason for this has been to mitigate the increasingly powerful lobbying by private media companies against the alleged market disturbing impact of public service media (Lund and Lowe 2013). Norbäck (2010) adds that another motivation for this shift is the hope that increasing competition can mitigate “escalating costs for content and talent” (2010, 245).

Within this development there are also several links to neoliberal ideology and governmentality. One obvious link is the willingness of the state to concede to private interests and their lobby groups. Another is arguably the politics of austerity and the pressure to reduce public spending, which Norbäck finds in the ideologically motivated resistance to “increasing, and often even maintaining parity, in the amount of public funding for PSB organisations” (Norbäck 2010, 245). In contrast to the view that neoliberal ideology mainly is concerned with creating a minimal state, historians of neoliberal thought have argued that a central tenet of neoliberal ideology is that the juridical and economic power of the state should be used to enhance market competition (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). The outsourcing of media production to private companies can thus also be seen as a way to use public funds in order to create and sustain conditions for a private market in media production. The need to do this should also be seen in the light of Sweden being a small media market that potentially could fail or become dysfunctional without the support of the state.

The public service broadcasting companies in Sweden have also, following international trends (Coppens and Sayes 2006), adopted neoliberal corporate governance structures. Since 1997, the public service organisations have been required to deliver an annual public service accounting, providing key performance indicators regarding how the organisation manages to fulfil the public service-agreement established by the parliament, by breaking down the public service mission into measurable units (Sveriges Television AB 1998). These reports are supposed to guarantee that the public service broadcasters deliver what the political system has decided and that the audience that pays the license fees gets what it wants. That such measures of control exist is not surprising, but their implementation also signals diminishing trust between the political system and the public service organisations. Furthermore, they show that the principle of arm’s length distance is a relative, rather than an absolute principle in the Swedish media system. The performance indicators have also been instrumental in steering the public service broadcasters to out-source their production, since this is one of the key measurements within these reports.

Internally, the public service television organisation in Sweden (SVT) has also reorganised itself as an organisation that mainly acquires content from different (external or internal) providers. From 2007 SVT describes itself as organisation with procurement managers and strategic purchasers who has responsibility for programme offerings and services

(Sveriges Television AB 2007, 18). The language used in SVT's public service account, signals the entry of new public management strategies into the organisation.

These transformations in the governance structure of the public service organisation have also had consequences for the content provided. Once again, in line with public service broadcasters in other countries, Swedish public service media have turned to popular formats such as reality-TV, lifestyle formats, and other genres, wherein the audience plays a greater role in the production of content (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson 2017). This shift has been highly debated and has sometimes been viewed as an abandonment of the public service mission and its emphasis on collective identity and education, in favour of consumption and a focus on the individual (Dawes 2014). However, it has also been argued that the shift toward lifestyle programming can be viewed both as a means to empower citizens under an increasingly reflexive modernity and as a normative steering of citizens in line with theories of governmentality, thus, as a reformulation of the public service mission that is in line with the shift from a welfare state to a neoliberal welfare state (Lunt 2009).

The Nordic/Swedish Media Company

A final aspect of the MWS lies within the relations between the state and the commercial media companies, and the specific role of commercial media within the welfare state. Syvertsen et al. (2014) highlight consensual and cooperative solutions in the policy-arena as one of the features of the MWS. Another common feature in the Nordic countries has been a "partial" concentration of the media market, where broadcasting has been highly concentrated (public service television) and newspaper ownership more dispersed. A third dimension of the relations between the state and the media industry has been a cultural policy that extends to the media in the form of content obligations and support schemes.

The prime example of how major media political debates and policy issues in the first half of the twentieth century was solved through political compromises between the left and the right—which relied on consensual agreement between other relevant stakeholders—is the implementation of radio and television as public service monopolies. This solution was supported both by Social Democrats and the right-wing parties, and constructed by agreements and consortia between important actors in society: the industry, the press, civil-society organisations, etc. Looking more closely at the media policy and relations between state and media companies, however, reveals a rather conflictual landscape behind the will to compromise, and in many respects the idea of a consensus between the state and industry of a "Nordic type" is hard to track, at least since the early 1990s. Subsidies for the press and for film, for example, have been met with strong opposition and was highly debated, and not introduced through consensus-based broad agreements (Vesterlund 2013). In addition, the relative consensus regarding the position of PSB has openly broken down in political conflicts illustrated, for instance, in the initiation of a privately funded public investigation on public service media, marshalled by the commercial media industry (Strömblad 2016).

The implementation of commercial radio in Sweden in the early 1990s is a well-documented and typical example on the conflictual and confused relations between media companies, public authorities and political actors (Forsman 2011). Intense and aggressive

lobbying from the right-wing parties, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise as well as think-tanks and lobby groups, coupled with corporate financing of FM-piracy in the 1980s, opened for a de-regulation in the early 1990s (Andersson 2001). Going against the political tradition in Sweden, the right-wing government (1991–1994) did not proceed with a thorough public investigation. The de-regulation and new radio law were instead presented via a short memo sent for review to relevant authorities, organisations, and experts. Many of them were highly critical and warned about the harmful effects of how the de-regulation was designed (Riksdagens snabbprotokoll 1992/93, 67). There was no consensus in parliament, and the opposition voted against the de-regulation (Privat lokalradio. Proposition 1992/1993, 70). After a shift in government in 1994, the Social Democrats tried to reverse the policy, but eventually failed. The ill-designed de-regulation of radio, furthermore, spurred intense conflict between the authorities and the industry. As concession-fees became far more expensive than estimated, profitability was almost impossible for the new radio industry (Stiernstedt 2013). The 1990s and early 2000s saw a range of lobbying and public campaigns from the industry, pushing the authorities and politicians to look at reform. Most spectacular was the 2009 public campaign *Rädda Radion* (“Save the radio”), which included public events, concerts, demonstrations, and the shut-down of all commercial radio broadcasting for one day. The fourth pillar of the MWS, where media policy is based on cross-border, consensus-based agreements to create long-term sustainability and is based on dialogue and collaboration between the state, the media industry, and the public, is clearly not applicable to this case.

The idea that media policy is a part of, or a form of, cultural policy (Syvertsen et al. 2014) is even more difficult to track in contemporary Swedish society. There are no content obligations on commercial media companies. TV4, the largest commercial television actor, used to have some limited obligations, but they were gradually discontinued and finally abandoned in 2008. If anything, Swedish media policy is marked by “competition policy” (Flew 2013), i.e. to enhance and facilitate competition through the creation and maintenance of markets. Concessions in broadcasting and telecommunications, for example, are handed out by the state through auctions; allocating resources through market mechanisms, where the highest bidder wins the right to capitalise on the resource. Other economic and/or competition-oriented policy measures are tax-cuts for media companies and the system of preview of public service in order to limit its effect on the market. Despite this neoliberal focus on creating markets and competition, Sweden shows one of the most concentrated media markets in Europe (Allern 2018), with a few dominating media companies, and the concentration of ownership constantly growing. The structure of “partial” concentration is being replaced by a concentration of ownership across all of the Swedish media industries.

Quo Vadis Media Welfare State?

We have relied on existing research to illustrate that the Swedish MWS for a long time has been in a process of a transformation. In all key areas covered by Syvertsen et al. (2014), we have identified ongoing changes. Regarding media use, differences have grown between groups in the population. Public service media still holds strong positions in the Nordic countries and in Sweden, but there have been shifts, both in the broadcasted material and in the organisation’s internal logic and its governance. Regarding the press,

digitisation and international competition in advertising have generated a structural transformation; the concentration of ownership has increased, while readership is declining. Here we mainly focused on the changes in press subsidies, which have meant that the aforementioned tendencies have been strengthened. The tradition of consensus and cooperation between media corporations and the state has been challenged, and the political consensus on broad issues on media policy is questionable.

As stated initially, Syvertsen et al. are ambivalent regarding the current status of the MWS. Given that the concept does not lend itself to quantification there is no point asking how much of the MWS that remains. What we have tried to do is to highlight *how* the MWS has changed—and to identify common patterns behind these changes. The transformations documented here concern only one country and it must thus be stressed that comparative, and longitudinal, research is required to more broadly assess transformation at the systemic level.

We suggest that the concept of the *neoliberal media welfare state* is well suited to describe the nature and the direction of the documented changes to the Swedish media system that we have discussed here. This concept captures the indebtedness of the current media system to the welfare model and the way that this model has been transformed during the last 30 years. Previous research has, however, discussed the same tendencies, and the conclusion has sometimes been that the media system in Sweden—as well as in the other Nordic countries—is becoming more “liberal” (Nord 2008; Ohlsson 2015), that is, more similar to the American and British systems. We largely agree with that premise, but we argue that the concept of the *neoliberal media welfare state* is more fruitful, since it highlights the specific historical path that has led to the current conjuncture. Our concept is thus meant to create distinctions and to highlight national differences. This last point is one of the strengths of Syvertsen et al.’ (2014) work, in comparison with the ideal types forwarded by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

Concepts matter, and the rhetoric embedded in the notion of the MWS is potentially politically and theoretically problematic. Politically, it carries a risk of pretense, suggesting that regardless of the many, more or less dramatic, changes made to the media system in the Nordic countries, they are still serving a universalising and equalising role. While not Syvertsen et al.’s (2014) standpoint, one conclusion from this could be that there is little to be concerned about and no need for political reform in order to reach those goals. Theoretically, the concept of the MWS is problematic because it creates an illusory link between the present media landscape and an imagined historical past. As such, the concept needs to be nuanced in order to identify salient features of the present media landscape in Sweden (and perhaps those of its neighbours) that has been introduced over a period of many years. Thus, a main conclusion here is that a central research priority should not be to demonstrate the continuation of the MWS, but rather its transformation—not only in the Nordic countries but also in the other welfare state systems.

A final point is that the need to address the MWS in academic research is arguably more important than ever. At the moment, the political ideas and public debate on future media policy seem to consist of a strange cocktail of more liberalism (e.g. privatised public service and abandoning press subsidies) and more regulation (e.g. politicisation of public service, decreased press freedom, and journalistic autonomy, and increased state control over digital media platforms). There are however signs in both Europe and the US that the state is returning to media policy (Flew, Iosifidis, and Steemers 2016) and there are many reasons to be attentive to this development. On the one hand we have

seen how both the EU and the US are moving towards regulating the large tech companies. On the other, right-wing populist parties wish to steer the media in a direction that is in line with their interests (Holtz-Bacha 2021). The return of the state, in opposition to the market, in the realm of media policy does consequently not imply a renewed and strengthened MWS. It can perhaps even be argued that the *neoliberal media welfare state* has constructed a governmental framework that is now open for a takeover by the next political project that manages to occupy a hegemonic position when (if) the neoliberal agenda has withered away. Of acute importance is the issue of how the *neoliberal media welfare state* will change in relation to the conservative, nationalist, and even fascist movements and ideologies that are winning ground in Europe and elsewhere. One task for scholarly work on media systems is the formulation of sustainable alternatives for the future, and partaking in the debate on the normative underpinnings of media systems.

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ORCID

Peter Jakobsson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5468-7229>

Johan Lindell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6689-0710>

Fredrik Stiernstedt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5247-8212>

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Peter Jakobsson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Johan Lindell (corresponding author) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University. Email: johan.lindell@im.uu.se

Fredrik Stiernstedt, is an Associate Professor at Department of Culture and Education, Södertörn University, Sweden.