

SWEDEN

Continuity and change in a more fragmented media landscape

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Introduction

Sweden is the largest of the Nordic countries, in terms of both geographic size (449,964 km²) and population (ten million people). Swedish democracy is based on a multiparty parliamentary system, where political parties have traditionally been more important than candidates in national elections. Modern Swedish political history has been dominated by a single party, The Social Democrats, which has been in power for 71 of the past 88 years. The party has been positively associated with the principles of the welfare state, economic growth, and outstanding political leadership. However, the two most recent national elections in 2014 and 2018 have also resulted in big successes for the right-wing populist party, The Sweden Democrats, which has led to complicated parliamentary situations and a more fragmented party system. Sweden joined the European Union in 1995 but is not a member of the euro currency zone. Politically, Sweden is considered a mature liberal democracy.

Freedom in the World 2021: status “free” (Score: 100/100, stable since 2017).

Liberal Democracy Index 2020: Sweden is placed high in the Top 10% bracket – rank 2 of 183 countries (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2021).

Freedom of Expression Index 2018: rank 10 of 183 countries, down from 7 in 2016 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017, 2019).

2020 World Press Freedom Index: rank 4 of 180 countries, fluctuating between 2 and 10 from 2013–2019 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

The Swedish media system has traditionally been a mixture of classical liberal notions of the press as an independent and monitoring “fourth estate”, and social responsibility ideas with necessary relationships between the political

system and media system to maintain diversity and public service in broadcast media. From a historical perspective, the prospects for independent journalism could not be better. Sweden was the first country in the world to include a Freedom of Information Act in its constitution, as early as 1766, and since then, freedom of expression and freedom of information have been embedded in the Swedish constitution, which provides stronger protection than common law. However, in reality, this liberal media approach has co-existed with numerous state regulations of the media sector and with a reactive media policy.

Traditionally, there have been very stable and fixed relations between the political system and the media system. The party press system, with different newspapers representing different political views and diverging societal interests, guaranteed external pluralism in print media during the twentieth century (Nord, 2001; Høyer, 2005). The public service broadcasting system in radio and television contributed to this picture, when introduced in 1924 and 1956 respectively, by offering internal pluralism in programmes based upon the concepts of objective and non-partisan reporting about political events (Hadenius, 1998).

Today, Swedish journalists are highly professionalised, and the country has a developed and institutionalised system for self-regulation as well as state regulations regarding, for example, the public service media, impartial and neutral programming in broadcast media, programming for children, and media subsidies for companies with weak market positions or operations in areas with low media presence (Weibull & Wadbring, 2020). As was the case for the previous Media for Democracy (MDM) report (von Krogh & Nord, 2011), Sweden still has no law against limiting media ownership despite many political suggestions in this area. Thus far, the problems associated with implementing such a law effectively have stopped the process. Besides the legal system, with its strong constitutional protection for freedom of information and freedom of speech, Sweden is characterised by a system of institutionalised self-regulation in the print market (cf. Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Swedish Press Council, founded in 1916, was part of this corporatist structure. Although the Swedish Press Council was not affiliated with the government, changes to make it more accountable to the public were encouraged by the parliament. The council made decisions concerning media ethics issues in public and also published regular reports with considerations and explanations regarding its policy positions (von Krogh, 2016). In 2020, the council changed its name to the Swedish Media Council and broadened its scope to include radio and television.

The party press system in the print media (including the press subsidy system) and the public service broadcast media were undoubtedly the core concepts of Swedish media policy during the 1950–2000 period. However, they have become less important as established media policy models have been challenged

by digital media technology developments, the rise of social media and dramatically changing media use patterns (Nord, 2008; SOU, 2016b).

In recent decades, the Swedish media landscape has undergone substantial changes. Newspapers, particularly on local and regional levels, face huge economic difficulties due to losses in readership and advertising revenues that have moved to global actors. Between 2008 and 2018, commercial media in Sweden lost one-third of its advertising revenue (Newman et al., 2019). Recent years have also seen unexpected media mergers, with the biggest private player, Bonnier, re-entering the local newspaper market after nine years of absence. Newspaper ownership concentration is higher than ever, the number of journalists is declining, and more editorial offices in rural areas are closing down (Truedson, 2019). Public service radio and television still hold relatively strong market positions but are increasingly questioned politically, both for their online activities, which are perceived as market distortions that undermine private media's profitability, and for not being impartial in their coverage of current events. Trust in public service media has become increasingly politically polarised with high trust in the middle and the left side of the political spectrum, and declining trust on the right side (Andersson, 2019).

However, the most significant media trend in Sweden is digital transformation. Online and mobile platforms have, to a large extent, supplemented and replaced print and broadcast media in a country where broadband penetration is 97 per cent today and expected to be 100 per cent by 2025. 70 per cent of the Swedish population now access news via smartphones, and 27 per cent pay for online news (Newman et al., 2019). The digital media infrastructure encourages more fragmented media consumption patterns, with social media playing a more important role than ever, also as a news provider. However, media habits vary strongly between generations and also between socioeconomic backgrounds (Nord et al., 2019). The mass media era where media offered everything for everyone has thus developed into a segmented media era where everyone puts together their own media diet, mainly based on personal interests and tastes.

Covid-19

From the middle of March 2020, public health authorities confirmed general diffusion of coronavirus in specific areas in Sweden. The government soon imposed restrictions on travelling and public meetings with more than 50 people. However, compulsory schools and nurseries remained open. The Swedish model deviated from other countries and was perceived as softer, and based more on recommendations and individual responsibilities. At the time of writing, death rates per capita have been high in comparison with neighbouring countries, and protection of the elderly has been particularly unsuccessful.

As normally is the case during crises, news media consumption in Sweden generally increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. The topic of the pandemic dominated the news media agenda completely as a major event of great importance for society and with huge implications for every single individual. The most significant change in traditional media use was observed among younger people, aged 15–24, where the share of daily news consumers increased from 49 to 59 per cent during Spring 2020 (Holmberg, 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis hit the media industry badly, and the loss of advertising revenues was particularly heavy in regional print media. The government announced two economic aid packages for news media. In April 2020, the existing media subsidy system was expanded, with approximately EUR 20 million per year for print newspapers to cover distribution costs and journalism in insufficiently covered geographic areas. One month later, the package was followed up by an extra amount of approximately EUR 50 million available for all types of news media facing economic difficulties due to the pandemic.

Leading news media sample

The data for the MDM 2021 edition is based on media statistics and some assessments concerning the general media situation, while the interviews relate to three national and two regional media outlets. Media selection was based on balancing private and public media, leading national and regional media, and including both reporters and editors. The interviews were conducted between November 2019 and January 2020 and included the media professionals presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Leading news media sample*

	Media type	Ownership	Interviewees
Aftonbladet	Daily tabloid, print & net	Schibsted	Associate editor; Reporter
Dagens Nyheter	Daily morning paper, print & net	Bonnier	Managing editor; Reporter
Sveriges Television (SVT)	National television	Public service	Deputy director; Reporter
Bonnier Local News	Regional daily, print & net	Bonnier	Editor-in-chief
Sveriges Radio	Regional radio station	Public service	Reporter
Journalist's Union	–	–	Chair person

Indicators

Dimension: Freedom / Information (F)

(F1) Geographic distribution of news media availability 3 POINTS

The media landscape has become more crowded and competitive.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

The Swedish population is concentrated in the southern part of the country, while only one of its ten million people live in the much more sparsely populated northern part. However, the supply of news media is satisfactory wherever people live. Newspapers are distributed all over the country, broadcast media reach all regions, and most households have access to broadband and smart-phones for digital news consumption.

During the last few decades, the Swedish media landscape has become highly digitalised and undergone considerable changes, with commercial radio and television channels, free tabloid newspapers, hyperlocal media, and various social media platforms being introduced (Weibull & Wadbring, 2020). The digital media landscape can be described as more competitive and crowded, and the supply of diverse media channels has increased significantly. But at the same time, media ownership became more concentrated, and the number of journalists and newsrooms decreased (Truedson, 2019). The free tabloid *Metro* is no longer operating in Sweden, and the commercial television channel TV4 has closed its local news departments.

As was the case a decade ago (see von Krogh & Nord, 2011), Swedish daily newspapers are still available for subscription all over the country, and evening tabloids are sold everywhere. Traditionally, local and regional newspapers have relatively strong market positions and cover all parts of Sweden. In 2015, 164 dailies existed in Sweden and 70 of them were published five days a week or more (Harrie, 2018). The newspaper market is rather stable in terms of the number of titles (see Table 2). One explanation for this is the state press subsidy system that has existed in Sweden since 1971. The system supports newspapers with a weak market position in order to keep them in the market, and in 2019, it was supplemented by new platform-neutral subsidies to media companies operating in areas without previous local journalism.

Table 2 Newspaper titles in Sweden, 2010–2018

Publication frequency	2010	2015	2018
6–7 days a week	70	66	63
5 days a week	4	4	4
3–4 days a week	18	20	19
1–2 days a week	69	69	56
Total	161	159	142

Source: Nordicom Media Statistics, 2021

The latest decade has also seen continued increased competition between broadcast media. In 2019, there were 30 public service radio stations (4 national and 26 local), 38 commercial radio stations (3 national and 35 local), and 139 community radio stations. The same year, there were 5 public service television channels and 36 Swedish private television channels available to the audience (Facht & Ohlsson, 2019). Since the introduction of the Internet, the boundaries of both radio and television have become increasingly unclear.

The movement from traditional to digital media is happening at a rapid pace. In 2019, 92 per cent of Swedes had a smartphone and 70 per cent had a tablet (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). Internet infrastructure is well developed, and broadband connections are now available for the majority of Swedish households. All national news media and all leading regional media offer online and mobile news services, as do international news media and global platform companies.

(F2) Patterns of news media use (consumption of news) 2 POINTS

News consumption has lessened and become more fragmented.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

Even if news media is available all over Sweden, it tends to reach people to a lesser extent than before. News is consumed regularly by segments of the population, but overall figures of news consumption are declining. As shown by data from *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, 22 per cent of Swedish media consumers consider themselves news avoiders and actively stay away from news often or sometimes (Newman et al., 2019).

The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* also indicates that peoples' general use of specific media as a news source is going down. Traditional media like print newspapers have seen a decline between 2016 and 2019, going from 43 per cent of the population saying they use newspapers as a news source to 30 per cent. During the same period, television figures have dropped from 72 to 67 per cent and the trend is the same for social media, where numbers

have decreased from 56 per cent in 2016 to 46 per cent in 2019 (Newman et al., 2019). The decline of social media news use is partly a result of changed Facebook algorithms, and partly an effect of regional news media focusing more on their own websites.

News consumption patterns have changed, and the most remarkable trend in recent years is that tabloids have a much larger digital audience compared with their print versions. Radio and television news still reach more people in broadcast formats, while local and regional newspapers have about the same reach in print and digital versions (see Table 3). A huge majority of Swedish digital news consumers (70%) access news on smartphones, which is one of the highest figures in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2019).

Table 3 *News media reach of top brands*

Media	Type	Weekly usage (%)
SVT News	Public TV	56 (offline) 31 (online)
TV4 News	Private TV	49 (offline) 18 (online)
SR News	Public radio	36 (offline)
Regional or local newspaper	–	22 (offline) 16 (online)
Aftonbladet	Tabloid	15 (offline) 45 (online)
Expressen	Tabloid	34 (online)

Source: Newman et al., 2019

These results are confirmed to a large extent by national surveys of media use in Sweden. They also show great differences in generational media use, as young people (aged 16–29) have social media as their main news source. 69 per cent in this age category regularly consume news on social media platforms, compared with 16 per cent of social media users among senior citizens. Even if there have always been age-based differences in news consumption, the contemporary generational digital divide based on social media use is remarkable (Andersson, 2019).

The above-mentioned trends confirm an ongoing transformation of media usage patterns in Sweden. The overall decline in news consumption and the increased gaps between younger and older audiences are the main reasons for lowering the grade of this indicator from three in 2011 to two a decade later.

(F3) Diversity of news sources

2 POINTS

In 2011
2 POINTS

There is an increased understanding of the importance of diversity of news sources, but elite dominance persists.

As in most other countries, powerful interests in society, representing political and economic elite groups, generally seem to be over-represented in the news. Systematic content analyses of Swedish news media during recent decades confirm this. Even if the total number of sources seems to have increased, journalists tend to rely on the same sources to a large extent (see Table 4). Politicians, experts, and spokespersons for companies and organisations dominate the news and journalists themselves also appear more frequently as experts commenting on current events, but over time, citizens have been the most frequent source category in regional news (Nygren, 2019).

Table 4 Most frequent sources in regional news (per cent)

	2007	2014	2018
Citizens	15	17	18
Public officials	15	9	14
Politicians	9	10	12
Experts	5	5	7
Public relations, spokespersons	2	3	4

Comments: Data based on content analysis of 4,809–5,631 news items from media in four selected regions.

Source: Nygren, 2019

This is confirmed by interviews with representatives of leading national media outlets. Editors and journalists are generally sceptical towards public relations material and try to find alternative frames for news stories. The diversity of sources is also positively associated with more resources spent on investigative journalism in both public service and private media.

There are policy documents with guidelines promoting diversity in most newsrooms. However, in daily work and stressful news situations, these principles are not always followed, and easily accessible elite sources are used more frequently. On the other hand, interviews show that concerns over the division between city and countryside have increased over the last years and resulted in editorial initiatives.

(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy 2 POINTS

Journalists have influence on editorial matters.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

The Swedish Constitution places all legal responsibility for newspaper content in the hands of the editor-in-chief, who is appointed by the owner, under the press laws. It is always the editor-in-chief who pays fines or goes to jail if editorial content is deemed illegal by a court of law. This is thought to make it more difficult for external forces to intimidate reporters. The situation remains largely the same as it was a decade ago (see von Krogh & Nord, 2011), with editors-in-chief appointed by the owners and the board of the newspaper. The same general rules in these processes are applied to broadcast media. Hence, no newsrooms in Sweden have internal rules for electing their editor-in-chief, and the debate on conditions for quality journalism in Sweden has never centred on the issue of newsroom democracy.

However, the lack of influence from journalists regarding the appointment of editor-in-chief does not mean they lack influence on other editorial matters. Daily news selection and news value processes are transparent, and the framing of political issues is openly discussed in the newsrooms. National media interviews indicate a mixture of ways to enhance impartiality and quality in framing and reporting political issues.

(F5) Company rules against *internal* influence on newsroom/editorial staff 2 POINTS

IN 2011
2 POINTS

The management and the newsroom are separate most of the time.

According to the Swedish Constitution and its Freedom of the Press Act, the owner has no right to interfere with editorial content. Only the person filed as responsible according to the press law, the editor-in-chief, has that right. If the owner wishes to decide editorial content, they must fire the responsible person and appoint a new editor-in-chief.

Interviews with leading news media representatives indicate that management, sales departments, and newsrooms are separated most of the time. This is particularly true for public service media, but private media also refers to restrictive internal rules in this matter and underlines the division between journalism and business. At the same time, some editors admit that increased market competition and economic pressure have led to less distinct boundaries between news and advertisements. In most cases where cooperation between commercial and editorial departments exists, it is conducted more subtly, as the issue of market influence on news content is still highly controversial. The Journalists' Union is worried about such issues in some news organisations.

(F6) Company rules against *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff

3 POINTS

In 2011
3 POINTS

There is less external pressure as subscriptions are becoming the single most important revenue source.

External influence on newsrooms and editorial staff has typically been considered a minor problem in Sweden. Public service media charters and organisational structures minimise the risk of direct political interference in news production. Sponsorship in public television is strictly regulated, with a limit on the number of yearly events that can be sponsored. In commercial television, rising revenues might be hidden in product placements by external production companies.

In print media, the editor-in-chief has a strong position according to press laws. Newspapers generally have no formal links to political parties, and political opinions are expressed only on editorial and debate pages.

Commercial pressure from large advertisers sometimes exists but is not common, neither on national nor local levels. It is also important to note that overall revenue patterns have changed for private media companies. Morning newspapers used to rely heavily on advertisement revenues, but now receive most of their income from subscriptions. In 2017, reports from the Swedish Newspapers' Association showed that 55 per cent of newspapers' average revenue came from subscriptions. This development also makes private media less sensitive to pressure from advertisers.

(F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing 3 POINTS

In 2011
3 POINTS

Newsroom practices are in line with formal rules.

News policy documents exist in most newsrooms, often developed during editorial conferences and workshops and well known among the editorial staff. They play a significant role and are often referred to when journalists discuss the diversity of voices and framing of news stories during daily news conferences.

Internal debates about news selection and news processing take place regularly, and previous news decisions may be openly criticised in the newsroom. Even though policy documents are important as guidelines and recommendations for newsroom work, professional perceptions of newsworthiness are still the single most decisive factor in the news production process. Final news decisions are often based on editorial routines and taken by news editors, but the individual journalist often has space for negotiations about how to develop the news story and has great freedom to decide the framing of the story and the main sources to rely on (Ghersetti, 2012).

Most newsrooms strive to combine weekly or monthly planning, allowing for spontaneous initiatives and investigative reporting according to policies, with the important political events of the day, emerging themes in social media, and suggestions from specialised reporters within the newsroom.

(F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality 3 POINTS

There are more women in top positions and newsrooms.

In a country where almost all leading politicians declare themselves as feminist, it is hardly surprising to find several women in top media positions. For example, in 2020, all three public service companies had a female director and two of four national newspapers based in Stockholm had a female editor-in-chief. Generally speaking, employment conditions are equal between men and women in the media sector, including equal pay for equal work.

Data on journalists' salaries shows that differences still exist between pay for men and women. These differences are mainly explained by the previous domination of men in the profession, and the fact that more experience as a journalist is normally linked to a higher salary. Gradually, more women are working in newsrooms, and journalist education programmes at the university level in Sweden are nowadays also dominated by female students. Interviews show that the biggest news organisations have special programmes to increase the number of women in leading positions.

(F9) Gender equality in media content 2 POINTS

The accepted principles are not always practised.

Gender equality is a basic principle in most news policy documents and is respected in daily routines. A significant change in recent years is the increased number of female sources in the news. In the mid-1990s, about 23 per cent of sources in leading news media were women. In 2018, the share of female sources had increased to 40 per cent. One possible reason is that there are more women in elite positions in Swedish society today, but there are also indicators of growing awareness of source diversity in newsrooms (Nygren, 2019). Several national newsrooms use gender metrics of their published editorial content as an instrument for change, and some even use software where reporters can check their content before publication.

Even if gender equality in media has improved over time and is generally accepted in newsroom work, these principles are not always easy to follow in

dramatic news situations, where easy access to established sources and spokespersons often prove to be more important than strict gender principles.

(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms
(alias social media)

2 POINTS

Doubtful information is usually checked.

Newsrooms are generally aware of the risks of misinformation and information coming from social media platforms and regularly discuss these problems. Even though there are no specially trained experts in place, leading news media maintain professional journalistic values such as fact-checking and getting information on news stories from various sources. However, voluminous and continuous information flows, time pressure, and limited editorial resources, particularly in regional media, make efficient checking of doubtful information difficult. Our interviews show that some newsrooms are pressing for more advanced artificial intelligence initiatives to tackle this problem.

While daily fact-checking procedures are not always working well, leading news media have been successful with single fact-checking initiatives. For example, during the latest election campaign, political statements and arguments were thoroughly scrutinised.

(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment 3 POINTS

In the face of increasing harassment, there is now better security for all staff.

Sweden, like many other countries, reports increasing cases where journalists are threatened or harassed. Leading politicians have declared that such actions should be perceived as threats to democracy and free media. Significant steps to protect journalists have also been taken by news media companies, who provide full and unlimited legal support for their journalists.

The public service company SVT has established a special cybersecurity team to counter attacks against individual reporters and the work they produce. Some 35 cases per day are handled, including hate-mail, digital and physical threats, and acts of violence. Cases are reported to the police, and security consultants provide protection to reporters and their families. In some instances, newsrooms have been evacuated after threats. The financial cost for security measures has quadrupled over the last five years. On the company level, cyberattacks and political attacks from other countries have been directed against investigative reporting on money laundering in the eastern parts of Europe and against reporting on human rights in China (Stjärne, 2020).

Dimension: Equality / Interest Mediation (E)

(E1) Media ownership concentration national level 2 POINTS

The previously existing oligopoly situation continues to be in place. IN 2011
2 POINTS

Sweden has no law against media ownership concentration. In the newspapers market, there are three dominant players: Bonnier (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Sydsvenskan*, *Mittmedia*), Schibsted (*Aftonbladet*, *Svenska Dagbladet*), and Polaris (*Göteborgs-Posten* and regional newspapers). Bonnier is the biggest owner group, and its business interests have expanded significantly in other parts of the country outside Stockholm. However, there is intense market competition between print and digital newspapers from different owner groups, both between national morning dailies and between national tabloids. Overall figures show gradually increasing owner concentration in the newspaper market (see Table 5).

Table 5 Owner concentration in the newspaper market (per cent of total circulation)

	1997	2003	2007	2010	2013	2015
Three biggest owners	40	45	58	59	55	62

Comments: Table shows newspapers published three times a week or more.
Source: Nordicom Media Statistics, 2021

The national radio market is traditionally dominated by public service radio, even though a few national private radio stations have been established in recent years. The national television market has four dominant players: Sveriges Television, SVT (public service); Telia (TV4 AB); Nent (Nordic Entertainment Group); and Discovery. They control a major part of the television market in terms of audience market shares (see Table 6).

Table 6 Owner concentration in the television market (per cent of audience market shares)

	1997	2005	2017	2018
Three biggest owners	88	80	82	82

Source: Nordicom Media Statistics, 2021

To conclude, levels of owner concentration on the national level are relatively high in most media sectors in Sweden. Still, national newspapers, radio stations, and television companies face competition, and alternative news sources are available for the audience.

(E2) Media ownership concentration regional (local) level 2 POINTS

Regional media empires have emerged.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

Fundamental structural changes have taken place in regional media markets in recent years. In 2019, the biggest national media owner Bonnier and Norwegian media company Amedia bought Mittmedia with its 28 local newspapers. Later in the same year, another Norwegian media consortium, Polaris, become the main owner of Stampen, the leading newspaper company in the Gothenburg region. Finally, Bonnier and Amedia also took over Hall Media in February 2020. Sweden is now strictly geographically divided between a few media owner groups, and the trend is definitely moving towards increased concentration. True competitive regional media markets are very rare, and only a limited number of newspapers do not belong to one of the main media owner groups. In 2017, the three biggest regional newspaper owners' share of the total circulation of daily regional newspapers was 51 per cent.

Private regional newspapers' main competitors are regional public service media. Regional public service radio offers 26 regional stations and 21 versions of regional television news are produced by 34 editorial offices all over the country. In 2015, the public broadcaster SVT opened four new editorial offices. The fourth public service radio channel, P4, is dominated by regional news and programmes. Regional television news is not offered on separate television channels but appears in regional news windows on the national channels. Public service broadcast media are the only regional and local news providers in radio and television. In 2014, the commercial competitor TV4 decided to close down its local television stations for economic reasons.

Overall, media ownership concentration has increased during the recent decade, and this development is more prominent regionally than on a national level. Despite this trend, most relevant regions in Sweden still have a competitive regional media market with both private media companies and public service media present.

(E3) Diversity of news formats 3 POINTS

There is an abundance of news formats of different types.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

Diverse news formats are available to the audience, both in traditional media and on digital media platforms. News is available at any time on the Internet and teletext. Public service radio newscasts are updated every hour of the day. Digital news is updated continuously, and a wide range of news formats are also offered on mobile devices. Traditional news reporting is supplemented by news podcasts, video play formats, and social media news feeds. News also appears

in weekly news magazines and freesheets. Radio and television produce daily news follow-up programmes and important news events are often covered live on radio, or on digital platforms.

Journalistic work is increasingly influenced by the variety of publishing platforms, and journalists on regional and local levels normally produce news material for different formats when reporting on current events.

(E4) Minority / Alternative media

2 POINTS

Minority and alternative media reach a limited audience.

IN 2011
1 POINT

Sweden is increasingly becoming a multicultural society and has received more immigrants per capita than most other European countries. In 2019, 19 per cent of the population was born outside Sweden. However, media content largely does not reflect these minorities, and they are not particularly well represented in the news. Journalists and editors are mainly ethnic Swedes and news consumption is generally lower among immigrant groups – a situation similar to what it was a decade ago (see von Krogh & Nord, 2011).

Public service media are obliged to provide content for ethnic minorities in Finnish, Sámi, Meänkieli, and Romani Chib. Programmes in immigrant languages like Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Somali are offered by public service radio on regular basis, and newspapers published in these languages may receive state subsidies for production and distribution. However, the supply of regular news is still relatively limited in suburban areas where many immigrants live.

The alternative media scene has become slightly more important in recent years. In Sweden, alternative media are mostly found on the far-right, and they have positioned themselves as alternatives for those who do not find legacy news media credible. *Fria Tider*, *Nyheter Idag*, and *Samhällsnytt* are the three most widely consumed, each reaching around one-tenth of the Swedish online population every week (Newman et al., 2019).

(E5) Affordable public and private news media

2 POINTS

Media spending is dominated by non-news media.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

Generally speaking, prices for newspapers, broadcast media, and the Internet are reasonable, as Sweden is a comparably rich country. Comparisons with other countries also show that Swedes are generally more willing to pay for news on digital platforms.

The change from licence fees to the tax system means that every individual now pays a maximum of EUR 130 for public service media every year. Prices

for print newspaper subscriptions have risen significantly, and the number of subscriptions for print newspapers has declined. In 2017, for the first time, the majority of Swedish households did not have a newspaper subscription, not even a digital one (Facht & Ohlsson, 2019).

Statistics show that Swedish households' overall costs for media use are now dominated by digital media, broadband connections, and mobile communications. At the same time, money spent on news media consumption has declined (see Table 7). During the period between 2014 and 2018, households' average total costs for media use increased from circa EUR 1,658 per year to circa EUR 1,966. The rise in costs was dominated by access costs (subscriptions) and video (streaming, pay-TV). During the same period, households' average costs for news media decreased from about EUR 170 per year to about EUR 157 (MPRT, 2019).

Table 7 Households' media costs per year (EUR)

	2014	2018
Access costs	609	775
Streaming	551	642
News media	170	157
Total costs	1,685	1,966

Comments: Examples of access costs are broadband connection, pay-TV, and mobile fee. News media costs include public service tax and fee, and newspaper subscriptions, both for print and digital versions. Approximate calculation of costs from SEK to EUR.

Source: MPRT, 2019

So, even if a majority of Swedish individuals and households still find single news media affordable in relation to their incomes, increasing media costs related to digital media technology have affected media budgets, and less money is now spent on news media than before.

(E6) Content monitoring instruments

1 POINT

Content monitoring is done occasionally.

IN 2011
1 POINT

There is no permanent independent monitoring institution, but content analyses are conducted on an irregular basis by research institutes, universities, and private companies. Specific events, such as election campaigns or crises, are more often analysed than ordinary news situations. Media coverage during election campaigns has been systematically checked since 1979, with a particular focus

on the political neutrality of news media (Asp & Bjerling, 2014). Besides these, there is no effective and publicly available monitoring instrument.

(E7) Code of ethics at the national level

3 POINTS

The code of ethics is implemented and frequently used.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

A code of ethics for leading national news media has existed for more than 100 years and has been regularly discussed and updated. The code of ethics is issued by the Media Administration Agency, which is an umbrella organisation for the main publishers' associations and the journalists' union. The code of ethics is well known in the newsrooms and often referred to in the debate on media performance.

Sweden also has many specialised journalists' associations for different purposes, such as investigative journalism, environmental journalism, science reporting, and so forth, that discuss ethical issues within these sectors. Interviews at the national and regional levels verify the importance attached to the recommendations made in the national code of ethics. The increase in live reporting of breaking news on the Internet has led to in-house training programmes of what the code implies for on-air decision-making for a wider group of reporters and editors. Interviews also reveal that links to the code are used by reporters to inform their sources of their rights.

(E8) Level of self-regulation

3 POINTS

Self-regulation instruments are in place.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

The first Press Council was established in 1916. It was restructured after political pressure in 1969 when members of the public were included in the council, a national press ombudsperson was added, and economic sanctions were introduced against erring newspaper organisations. In 2020, both institutions were replaced by The Media Council and The Media Ombudsman, as broadcast media were also included in the self-regulation system along with print and digital publications. The Media Ombudsman is an independent self-disciplinary body that facilitates complaints from the public and selects cases to bring to The Media Council (Media Ombudsman & Media Council, 2021). The council then decides whether or not the media outlet deserves the blame. The code of ethics includes referral to democratic values and rights of reply. The journalists' union has a committee that can sanction members for unethical behaviour, but in practice – and as was the case in 2011 as well (see von Krogh & Nord, 2011) – it rarely does.

The Publicists' Club, which is a member of the umbrella organisation the Press Cooperation Committee, upholds a continuous function of self-criticism with regular panels and debates on critical media matters. Top editors at leading national news media regularly comment upon current publicity debates and publishing decisions taken by them.

The self-regulation system is frequently under debate in Sweden, but has hitherto shown its strength and is generally respected by media companies. The system can't be described as completely decisive for daily newsroom work, but it is occasionally used when principles for news selection and publishing criteria are discussed. The system was tested in 2017 when the threshold for publishing rumours and allegations of sexual harassment was lowered during the #metoo movement. 38 complaints were handled by The Media Council and 24 of them were approved, all criticising newsrooms for lack of reporting and substantiation. The current ombudsperson for the media has toured newsrooms in Sweden discussing the #metoo cases.

(E9) Participation

2 POINTS

Participation is only sometimes welcome.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

In theory, most editors and journalists are in favour of increased citizen participation in newsrooms, as this strengthens connections between news media and their audiences. In the first years of the digital revolution, most news media also opened up for readers' comments on news stories and argued that there was great value in an ongoing discussion with the public on news published.

This has changed significantly in recent years, as commentary fields often tended to be dominated by extreme, often far-right, opinions not in line with ethical publication principles. The resources required for editorial monitoring of commentary fields have resulted in more restricted policies for citizen participation in general. However, leading news media may open up for commentaries on carefully selected – and less controversial – topics, and there is still a huge demand for amateur pictures or videos from eyewitnesses at accidents or dramatic events.

Generally speaking, the main reasons given for user participation are democratic values, more perspectives, more value for readers in online forums discussing the relevance of news, and possibilities to develop new forms and formats of journalism. On the other hand, user participation is perceived as costly to monitor and with a lower level of quality than professional journalism.

Several newsrooms provide live chats with their audiences on current topics, use external firms for moderating comments with support of artificial intelligence, and monitor their audiences' news preferences on social media platforms.

(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism

2 POINTS

There are no formal rules, but a regular debate is ongoing.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

Internal pluralism is considered important in both national and regional newsrooms. The homogeneity of newsrooms in terms of age and ethnicity is regarded as a problem in most media companies, and various strategies have been implemented to counter this. There are no standardised procedures to promote internal pluralism, but the topic is discussed in various forms. Some examples are internal monitoring, internal goals, targeted recruiting, special online projects, workgroups with representatives from newsroom management and the journalists' union, daily and weekly newsroom debates, and encouraging online participation of special groups and interests.

Interviews indicate that top editors are concerned with the broad overall picture of Sweden that their newsroom is presenting, thinking about issues such as how much content is relevant only to an educated middle class in the bigger cities. Reporters say they are concerned with finding a more diverse group of expert sources to interview.

Dimension: Control / Watchdog (C)

(C1) Supervising the watchdog "control of the controllers"

2 POINTS

IN 2011
2 POINTS

Media performance is often discussed.

Media coverage of major news events is often discussed in public and followed up in news commentaries in the press or in debate shows on radio and television. Public service radio, Sveriges Radio, produces a daily show on current topics, including discussions of media performance and a weekly show dedicated solely to media matters, *Medierna* [*The Media*]. Specific media critique is also offered on websites by media bloggers, and in podcasts about journalism. Private and state-financed institutes publish books on media performance based on investigative journalism and academic research and arrange public seminars or debates to discuss the findings. The Publicists' Club holds monthly live-streamed debates on current media and journalistic issues, and the current media ombudsperson, Ola Sigvardsson, is an active participant in the general debate on media ethics and media performance on his blog, op-ed pages, public service shows, and the union magazine *Journalisten's* podcast.

Even though the "control of the controllers" takes place in diverse fora, it is difficult to articulate a permanent debate on media watchdog functions,

although there are indications of top editors' growing awareness of potential scrutiny in *Medierna* on Sveriges Radio (Rosenvinge, 2019). Discussions can be very intense, but they often occur outside any specific organisational setting. Furthermore, debates generally only include media professionals, academics, and other elite groups. Media critique that engages a wider public is rare, and when it happens, it is most often politically biased, and less focused on the democratic role of news media. Some exceptions to this are increasing awareness of blind spots in local journalism and social media influence on #metoo reporting in general news media.

(C2) Independence of the news media from powerholders

3 POINTS

IN 2011
3 POINTS

The independence of private and public news media is well protected from powerholders.

The Swedish Freedom of Information Act generally forbids journalists from revealing their sources and forbids authorities from searching for sources who have given secret material to media for publication purposes. As previously noted, journalists are also not sentenced by law for offensive publications, and only the editor-in-chief is responsible by law. There are exceptions, but these deal not with content, but with conduct while gathering information. For instance, journalists can be prosecuted for posing as officials or for trespassing on private property. Overall, legal instruments work well and private news media have good protection from influential power groups in society.

Public service media have clauses in their charters to publish news items that are factual and impartial, and powerholders in society (which includes the state itself) are to be scrutinised. The only imposed partialities concern defending democracy and human rights. The financing of public service media is decided in periods of six years at a time. An arm's length principle is the norm to establish a certain distance between the government or parliament and the public broadcasters. The government appoints a committee, which in turn appoints board members of the different public broadcasters of radio, education, and television.

The recent (2019) transformation of the financing model of public service media from licence fee system to tax system has the potential to increase state influence. However, public service financing is not directly included in the negotiated state budget decided every year, but technically administrated in another way. Of course, all models of public financing include possible risks for state interventions and political pressure at different stages of the decision-making process.

(C3) Transparency of data on leading news media

2 POINTS

Information is easily available online.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

Government inquiries on private and public media are regularly conducted by parliamentary committees, expert groups, and public servants. Their conclusions on media policy and the data they base their conclusions on are published on governmental websites. The latest news media inquiry was completed in 2016 (SOU, 2016b), and the latest public service media inquiry in 2018 (SOU, 2018: 50).

News media ownership information is not very easy to find. The academic research institution Nordicom at the University of Gothenburg publishes regular reports on the media, including the ownership structure, that are available for download. Ownership information is not widely spread among the population. The rapid transformation of the media landscape and the increased ownership concentration in regional media markets in recent years is briefly on the agenda but hardly reported on a more regular basis.

The newspapers in our sample do not print information about their owners in every issue. Their websites, however, contain information on, for instance, owners, circulation, finances, and editorial policies. The public service websites include information on management, financing, and government relations.

(C4) Journalism professionalism

3 POINTS

There is a high degree of professionalisation.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

According to national surveys among Swedish journalists, a huge majority strongly endorse the professional goals of independent scrutinising of power-holders, gathering and distributing information to citizens to inform decisions in a democracy and giving a voice to the voiceless. The figures are high from a comparative perspective (Strömbäck et al., 2012).

According to national interviews, investigative reporting is considered the top priority in leading news organisations. Professional and democratic aspirations are accompanied by a commercial interest in reader revenues. The journalists' union stressed the increased workload of journalists when newsrooms are downsized and expressed concern about the professional identity of those who combine journalistic freelance work or short-term employments with other kinds of communication and information occupations. The union monitors native advertising and issues warnings when professional conduct may be threatened.

In the regional interviews, media representatives said that investigative journalism remains poorly developed, with no regional media having journalists or routines designed for investigative journalism. When such journalism

does occur, it is more likely to be the result of ad hoc decisions than of long-term editorial planning – similar to the situation in 2011 (see von Krogh & Nord, 2011). Analyses of regional media newsroom practices have even been referred to as a possible de-professionalisation of journalism on the regional level (Nygren, 2008).

Leading national news media in Sweden must be considered highly professional and with sufficient and sustainable resources to maintain basic democratic functions, including independent investigative journalism.

(C5) Journalists' job security

2 POINTS

Conditions are good but there are fewer permanent positions.

IN 2011
2 POINTS

Permanently employed journalists have pretty stable job security, but the number of temporarily employed persons is increasing. Staffing agencies for journalists have become more common, as has the use of freelance journalists.

Swedish labour laws protect employees from being dismissed for their personal convictions. The Journalists' Union argues for less short-term employments to protect members' financial situation, but also to foster a more secure work atmosphere with healthy opposition and debate on journalistic issues. The journalists' union estimates that staffing agencies' share of the workforce has been somewhat reduced, but is still considered a problem.

(C6) Practice of access to information

3 POINTS

Old traditions still work.

IN 2011
3 POINTS

Sweden has a very old tradition of open government, and the default status for governmental documents since 1766 is public. They are open to anyone, not just to journalists, although journalists are more experienced than ordinary citizens in gathering and using public documents. During the past 50 years, secrecy clauses have become increasingly common in legislation. The motives for this are said to be privacy concerns due to the openness of digital documentation, protection of personal integrity, and protection of commercial and state interests.

Swedish citizens and journalists still have very good access to most kinds of governmental documents. Some cases have been reported when government officials have not documented their decisions in writing in order to avoid public scrutiny.

The journalists' union declared that the principle of transparency needed to be continuously defended. Interviews with reporters revealed differences

between state agencies and problems in gathering information when schools go from being public to operating privately.

(C7) The watchdog and the news media's mission statement

3 POINTS
IN 2011
2 POINTS

Watchdog journalism exists where possible.

The watchdog function of the media is present both in written documents and, as previously noted, in the overall rhetoric motivating newsgathering. Few observers in Sweden ascribe any decisive force to the mission statements. They are most important during the process of formulation, but not particularly important in later stages (von Krogh, 2008). None of the regional media studied here has editorial policy documents that explicitly mention the watchdog role (unchanged over ten years; see von Krogh & Nord, 2011), but all leading national news media in the sample refer to it and exercise it.

Generally speaking, news media tend to focus on audience-oriented news and on providing people with important and interesting news. Such statements may implicitly include investigative journalism and an active watchdog role, but this is not very often explicitly mentioned in mission statements. One could argue that the tradition of highly professionalised journalism in Sweden makes it less natural to specifically highlight in statements what is more or less commonly expected from news media performances.

National interviews with reporters and editors show that rather than a one-way traffic from words in a mission statement to practices in the newsroom, the growing amount of investigative reporting has also been reflected in policy documents under the label of agenda-setting reporting.

(C8) Professional training

2 POINTS
IN 2011
2 POINTS

The idea of training is applauded, but not practised often.

The benefits of further professional training for journalists are widely acknowledged by both employers and employees. There is also a special government-financed institute for further education of journalists in the south of Sweden, Fojo. This institute most often commonly offers week-long courses at no charge, and journalists keep their salaries during the course period. In addition, there are many funds to which journalists can apply for scholarships for further education.

Public service media companies have their own programmes for in-house training. Some national newspapers underline the possibilities for on-the-spot

training by skilled veterans as news events unfold. Training opportunities for journalists in regional news media companies are less frequent. The journalists' union wishes to see an increase in further education and recommends more cooperation with universities.

National interviews with editors and reporters indicate that growing attention for investigative reporting is also reflected in terms of further education of journalists, as investigative data journalism has top priority.

(C9) Watchdog function and financial resources

3 POINTS

There are increased differences between national and regional or local media.

In 2011
2 POINTS

Interviews with editors in leading media organisations led to the unanimous conclusion that investigative reporting is first on their list of priorities. After a period, ten years ago, with a somewhat uncertain perspective on the future for journalism, a new sense of purpose is now visible. Democratic, professional, and commercial values converge with unique reporting on matters of importance to society and democracy to make readers willing to pay for digital news.

Editors in privately owned newsrooms estimate that about 10 per cent of their editorial resources are devoted to investigative reporting. "We pretty much try to give them the software and the time they ask for", one top editor declared. Interviews with reporters do not contradict this picture. "This is a good time for investigative reporters", a journalist explained.

The public service broadcaster SVT has a weekly flagship show for investigative journalism called *Uppdrag Granskning* [*Mission Investigation*] that alone counts for 7 per cent of the nationwide company's budget. If the funds for spreading knowledge and practice of investigative methods within the company to specialised parts of the newsroom (sports, culture, economy, environment, etc.) and to some 20 regional newsrooms is included, the share of the budget rises to 20–25 per cent.

Regional privately-owned media house editors show the same enthusiasm and need for investigative reporting, but also admit they are not always able to fulfil their watchdog function in local municipalities due to limited personal and economic resources.

The journalists' union applauded the resources allocated to investigative journalism but criticised the long period of time it took publishers, educated in finance more than journalism, to realise the commercial value of watchdog journalism.

Conclusions

The overall developments of media performance during the last decade show signs of both continuity and change, but leading news media in Sweden still generally meet most democratic criteria in terms of freedom, equality, and control functions. Professional journalism is highly valued and extensively practised, both on national and regional levels. Traditions of openness and transparency remain, and the idea of independent media is widely supported in society.

The most important changes in recent years are mainly explained by the more fragmented media landscape. As a result, news consumption patterns diverge in different segments of the population with increasing gaps between high consumers of news and so-called news avoiders. Swedish households also spend more money on media consumption in general, but the share of costs for news media consumption is declining. Finally, trust in news media has become more politically polarised in recent years, with right-wing populist supporters being more distrustful.

Freedom of information is secure in the Swedish media system. News media cover all areas of Sweden, and news regularly reaches most citizens. The arm's length principle is a cornerstone in relations between public service media and the state, and private media newsrooms are to a very large extent protected from internal and external pressure. Professional journalistic values guide news selection processes and the use of sources in news.

Equality is still achieved in some areas, but increased owner concentration in commercial media markets remains a problem. During the last decade, this process has been most visible on regional media markets which are now dominated by a few key actors, present both on national and regional levels of the media system. Minority groups tend to be less covered by news media.

The watchdog function of the media is considered extremely important by all interviewed editors and journalists in the study. Investigative reporting is highly prioritised in leading national news media, but regional media representatives feel limited by the few resources available for such initiatives. Debates of media performances are relatively frequent, but most of the time they only include media professionals and experts.

To conclude, leading news media in Sweden fulfil their democratic roles to a considerable extent, and the situation has improved slightly over time. When the same criteria were examined in 2011, Sweden received 60 points in total, corresponding to 77 per cent of maximum points. Ten years later, the result is 73 points, corresponding to 81 per cent of the maximum points.

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