

Chapter 3

Media and politics in Iceland

Jón Gunnar Ólafsson & Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir

Abstract

This chapter outlines the political and media landscapes in Iceland in comparison to the other four Nordic countries. The political communication literature routinely groups the Nordic countries together and defines them in terms of a Nordic model. Iceland has, however, seldom been included in this literature, and research on political communication in the country is scarce. The chapter shows that the Icelandic media and political systems differ in significant ways from those in the other Nordic countries. Corporatism is less developed in Iceland, as is journalistic professionalism, and remnants of political parallelism have carried over to a highly commercial media system. This has operated without the public service requirements or support for private media that characterise the other Nordic countries. Iceland was particularly impacted by the 2008 financial crisis, and the years following have seen various changes regarding media and politics. Recent developments indicate that the Icelandic system might be becoming more similar to the other Nordic countries.

Keywords: Iceland, Nordic model, media system, political communication, journalism

Introduction

This chapter introduces developments and changes in the media structure in Iceland in recent years and examines the relationship between media and politics in the small country. First, we introduce the main actors and institutions in the political and media systems in Iceland. We illustrate how the established four-party system has recently given way to a more fragmented and fluid political system following the 2008 financial crisis. We also show how rapid economic, political, and technological changes have impacted the Icelandic media landscape.

Second, we demonstrate how the Icelandic political and media systems differ from the other Nordic countries. Iceland is routinely ignored in political com-

munication research, and when mentioned, it is often simply grouped together with Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland and defined as some sort of “Nordic model”. We show that this is problematic. Available studies and data focusing on the Icelandic case paint a picture of a highly commercial media system, but with less-developed journalistic professionalism and without the public service requirements or public support of private media that characterise the other four Nordic countries. Remnants of political parallelism from the past have carried over to a new media system moving closer to the liberal model, and Iceland shares similarities with the polarised pluralist countries when it comes to a tight bond between the political and business spheres and a weak media regulatory body.

Third, we outline the existing political communication research on Iceland. It is difficult to define specific theoretical perspectives in relation to this research, since political communication is an under-developed field of study in Iceland. Much of the scarce research that does exist has focused on mapping the structural landscape and catching up with foundational research that has been carried out in the other Nordic countries in recent years and decades. Recently, however, more scholars have entered the field with new insights on media and politics. Finally, we discuss the challenges to political communication research in Iceland and highlight areas for future studies.

The political landscape

Iceland is a parliamentary republic. It became a sovereign state in 1918 but remained in a royal union with Denmark until 1944, when it adopted its republican constitution. Alþingi, the Icelandic legislature, is a unicameral parliament. It consists of 63 members who are elected in six multimember constituencies by two-tier proportional representation (the d’Hondt method). Fifty-four members are elected according to constituency results whilst the nine remaining supplementary seats are allocated on the basis of national results amongst the parties obtaining at least 5 per cent of the national vote (Harðarson, 2008).

Historically, there have been four main parties in the Icelandic party system that took shape between 1916–1930. The traditional four types of parties are easily recognisable when compared to similar European parties. They consist of a conservative party (the Independence Party), an agrarian or centre party (the Progressive Party), a social democratic party, and a left-socialist or communist party. A restructuring has regularly taken place on the left side of the political spectrum, and the two parties to the left are now called the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Movement. In addition to these four parties, there have usually been one or at most two other smaller parties represented in the Icelandic parliament (Harðarson, 2008; Önnudóttir & Harðarson, 2018).

The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath shook the foundation of Icelandic politics, including the four-party system. The collapse of all major banks in Iceland caused economic and political turmoil and spurred massive protests in the country, often referred to as the “pots and pans revolution” (Bernburg, 2016). Although the economy has recovered remarkably well (Jónsson & Sigurgeirsson, 2017), there is still considerable political instability, witnessed recently by early elections following the Panama Papers scandal in 2016 and early elections again in the autumn of 2017 (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018). Trust in various institutions in Iceland collapsed following the crisis. In February 2008, a few months before the crisis hit, 42 per cent of Icelanders said they trusted the Icelandic parliament – a year later, trust had plummeted to only 13 per cent. In 2012, trust in the parliament hit an all-time low of 10 per cent, and the most recent poll in 2020 measured it at 23 per cent (Gallup, 2020). As Bjarnason (2014) illustrates, trust in most institutions fell particularly sharply in Iceland in comparison to other countries. Various studies have shown that public trust is more likely to fall in countries that go through an economic crisis when compared with countries that do better in economic terms. This is not necessarily suggesting causation, but this correlation has been shown in various studies, as Bjarnason illustrates.

The years following the financial crisis have seen a substantial change in the vote share of the four established political parties, as well as the number of political parties represented in the Alþingi. Until the election of 2013, the four parties usually received a total of around 85–90 per cent of the vote in parliamentary elections. In 2013, the four parties received 75 per cent, and this shrunk even further to 63 per cent in 2016 and 65 per cent in 2017. The established parties appear to have lost their dominant status following the crisis, creating a vacuum for new political parties and voices to emerge. Since the 2009 election, there have been six new political parties in the Icelandic parliament. Four of them – the Pirate Party, the People’s Party, the Centre Party, and the Reform Party – won representation in the parliament in the 2017 election. This means that there are currently eight political parties represented in the Alþingi – a record number. The Icelandic Election Study (ICENES) illustrates that the proportion of partisan voters has been declining. In 1983, the proportion of respondents who said that they supported a particular party was 50.2 per cent, but in 2016, this number had almost halved, with only 29.5 per cent claiming to support a party (Önnudóttir & Harðarson, 2018). Put simply, there are more political parties now than ever before, and Icelandic voters are more willing to switch their support than they were previously.

In general, neoliberalism has been more influential in Icelandic politics and policy-making than in the other Nordic countries (Jónsson, 2014; Ólafsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2014). This is not surprising considering the historically dominant role of the conservative Independence Party. Iceland deviates from the Scandi-

navian norm of strong social democratic parties. The Independence Party has been by far the most dominant political force in the country, enjoying around 40 per cent of the votes in the pre-crisis four-party era. It has also been the most dominant party in government; in the 76 years since the foundation of the republic, the party has been in government for 57 years. It has been “the party of officialdom and the establishment of Iceland” (Kristinsson, 2012: 189). However, in the post-crisis era, the vote share of the Independence Party has shrunk substantially, with the party winning 25.2 per cent of the vote share in the 2017 election (Statistics Iceland, 2017a).

Iceland has a multiparty system and proportional representation, but power sharing, compromise, and cooperation between opposing forces is not a very fitting description of Icelandic politics, unlike Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) description of the Nordic system (Harðarson, 2008; Jónsson, 2014; Kristinsson, 2018; Skogerbø et al., Chapter 1). Jónsson (2014: 11) notes that the main division of power has not been between the legislative and executive branches of government, “but between the majority and minority in Parliament”. Kristinsson (2018: 5) argues that privileged access to state power was crucial in the patronage network of parties and politicians that characterised Icelandic politics, which in return “encouraged political conflict and competition for power”. Unlike the other Nordic countries, minority governments have usually not been tolerated (Jónsson, 2014) as there have only been four minority governments in Iceland since the foundation of the republic in 1944.

The distinction between majority and consensus rule is connected to the political role of interest groups in society, or in other words, the level of corporatism. Corporatism developed late in Iceland and only in limited areas of policy. Jónsson (2014) argues that this can largely be explained by the political weakness of the social democrats and the left. Nonetheless, the media system in Iceland in the twentieth century bore more resemblance to organised pluralism – typical in both the democratic corporatist countries and the polarised pluralist countries – than the individual pluralism prevalent in the liberal countries. Organised pluralism is associated with external pluralism and political parallelism in the media, and the Icelandic press had strong ties to political parties until the end of the twentieth century. Each of the national newspapers was affiliated to one of the four main political parties (Harðarson, 2008). The political parties dominated most spheres of society, including foreign trade, banking, literature, housing, and jobs in the government and the media (Jóhannsdóttir, 2019; Kristinsson, 2012). This is a characteristic that Iceland shares with the polarised pluralist countries, where clientelism was strong through much of the twentieth century and whose legacy Hallin and Mancini (2004: 58) claim “is still important to understanding the media system in that region”. The Icelandic media system, similar to the political one, in some ways differs from the systems in the other four Nordic countries.

The media landscape

In the 1970s and onward, the political parties' hold on society in general – and the media in particular – began to subside. Political parallelism in the media gave way to more market-driven media. The political parties' hold on the publicly funded National Broadcasting Service (RÚV) started to lessen in the last decades of the twentieth century (Guðmundsson, 2009; Harðarson, 2008). In 1997, the last political party newspaper ceased publication, and the first Icelandic online news publication appeared in 1998 (Friðriksson, 2000). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the first free daily newspaper was launched (Karlsson, 2004).

The media system that emerged in Iceland in the beginning of the twenty-first century was characterised by a high supply of all forms of media. The quantity and diversity are perhaps greater than might be expected in a country of around 360 thousand people (Statistics Iceland, n.d.). At the time of writing in 2020, there are two national daily newspapers, two weeklies, one biweekly, and several online news sites with no links to traditional media, all of which play an increasingly prominent part in the provision of daily news. There are also some specialised publications, as well as regional and local papers, but most of them are small, and local media have always been weak in Iceland (Guðmundsson, 2006; Statistics Iceland, n.d.). The Icelandic media market is dominated by four media companies, in terms of revenue, audience share, and number of journalists employed: RÚV and three private media companies, Torg, Sýn, and Árvakur.

The Icelandic media market has been in turmoil in recent years and mergers and takeovers have been frequent. Until 2017, the company 365 Media was by far the biggest private media company in Iceland, operating several television and radio stations, newspapers and online sites, as well as magazines and telecoms. However, in March 2017, the broadcasting part of 365 Media was sold to Sýn (Vodafone Iceland), which is now the only private actor in broadcasting that has its own news operation, Channel 2 (Stöð 2) and radio Bylgjan. Sýn also took over *Vísir*,¹ the second most-read online news site in the country. The free paper *Fréttablaðið*, the most-read newspaper in Iceland, and an online news site of the same name,² was part of 365 Media and is now owned by the company Torg. The company also publishes the tabloid newspaper *DV* and its online counterpart.³ *DV* has had a somewhat rocky past; its ownership has changed hands several times and so has its publication frequency, now published once a week (B. Þ. Guðmundsson, 2017). Torg also owns the talk show television station Hringbraut and its online counterpart.⁴

The third large private company is Árvakur. It publishes *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland's oldest newspaper, with historical links to the conservative Independence Party. The paper dominated the newspaper market for most of the twentieth

century, both in terms of circulation and revenue. However, it lost its leading position when free papers entered the scene. *Morgunblaðið*'s website, *Mbl*,⁵ on the other hand, has been the most-read online news site in Iceland since its foundation in 1998. Árvakur was near bankruptcy after the 2008 financial crash and was consequently taken over by one of the banks and sold to a group of investors with ties to the fishing industry in 2009 (Guðmundsson, 2013; Kolbeins, 2015).

In addition to these private companies, there is the public broadcaster RÚV, which has maintained a strong and stable position in the media market despite increasing competition, not least by online media (Ohlsson, 2015). In 2020, RÚV was, as the other Nordic public service corporations, funded by a broadcasting tax (Ohlsson, 2015; Schweizer & Puppis, 2017) and allowed to carry advertisements and advertising sales amounting to approximately one-third of its revenue (RÚV, 2015). In this sense, RÚV has also always been a commercial station (Broddason & Karlsson, 2005), but it is not permitted to sell advertisements online. Its share of the total revenue of the media in Iceland is around 20 per cent and has been stable since the turn of the century (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

In addition, the Icelandic news media market encompasses one weekly business paper, *Viðskiptablaðið*, one weekly free paper focusing on news and culture, *Mannlíf*, and two small national media outlets, *Stundin*⁶ and *Kjarninn*.⁷ Both were founded by journalists and, though not the most-read news sites in the country, have been quite influential and often cited in the mainstream media. *Stundin* is subscription based and is also published in print twice a month. *Kjarninn* is financed by advertising and its content is open to everyone, but it also receives substantial revenue from a monthly voluntary subscription (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018). In addition to its online news site, *Kjarninn* publishes the weekly magazine *Vísbending*, focusing on business and economics.

It is a distinctive characteristic of the Icelandic press market that it has “produced neither elite-oriented quality papers nor extremely populist tabloids” (Karlsson, 2004: 242). In a market as small as the Icelandic one, there is little room for readership segregation based on purchasing capacity and other socioeconomic divisions, and Icelandic newspapers mostly cater for readership among the general population. The strong position of the free papers in the Icelandic media market is also somewhat unique. In 2010, Iceland and Luxemburg were the only European countries where the penetration of free newspapers was higher than that of their paid-for counterparts (Bakker, 2013; see also Karlsson, 2009). The free papers have been general-purpose papers with serious coverage of domestic and international news, not down-market tabloids, and delivered to people's homes (Bakker, 2008).

Newspaper circulation and readership in Iceland has traditionally been very high, but it is declining. The publication of the free paper *Fréttablaðið* in 2002

did increase newspaper penetration, or at least postponed its decline, but its circulation is also dwindling (Harrie, 2017). Whilst newspaper readership has been in steady decline for a long time, online news reaches increasingly more people. By far the most-read online news sources are Árvakur's website *Mbl* and Sýn's *Vísir*. As in the other Nordic countries, the Internet is ubiquitous, with 99 per cent of Icelanders between the ages of 16 and 74 using the Internet regularly (Internet World Stats). Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform – with a total of 93 per cent using it regularly – and more Icelanders are on social media compared to their Nordic cousins (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

In economic terms, Icelandic media expanded tremendously towards the end of the past century and in the first years of the twenty-first century. From 1995 to 2008, television revenue more than doubled, and the revenue growth in radio and newspapers were 56 and 51 per cent, respectively (online editions included) (Karlsson, 2009; Statistics Iceland, 2018). The new media system that emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century was, however, not only characterised by a high supply of all forms of media but also by increasing commercialisation, convergence, and intense ownership concentration in private media (Harðarson, 2008). Also, with the Media Act of 2011, a new administrative commission was established (the Media Commission), which carries out the supervision of the media market and attends to day-to-day administration in the fields covered by the law (Act no. 38, 2011).

The financial crisis that rocked the economies of countries in Western Europe in 2008 was a blow to a media industry already in turmoil. Iceland was particularly impacted by the financial crisis. The ensuing political and economic turmoil in the country has received substantial academic attention from political scientists, economists, sociologists, and historians, among others (Bernburg, 2016; Indriðason et al., 2017; Jóhannesson, 2009; Johnsen, 2014; Jónsson, 2009). Less attention, however, has been paid to investigating developments in the Icelandic media in the aftermath of the crisis, even though the crisis affected the media in many ways (with the notable exception of Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

Between 2007 and 2010, the revenues of media companies in Iceland declined by approximately a quarter, and in 2018, they were still 17 per cent lower than before the financial crisis (Statistics Iceland, 2018). According to Friðrik Þór Guðmundsson (2016: 41) the total turnover of the five largest media companies “almost halved between the years 2007 and 2009, measured in fixed prices”. The advertising revenue of the media fell by 68 per cent from its peak in 2007–2009, calculated in 2015 fixed prices (Statistics Iceland, 2017b). As a result, some publications ceased to exist, and others downsized. Almost a third of the journalist population was laid off, among them many experienced journalists (Jóhannsdóttir, 2015; Kolbeins, 2012).

As noted earlier in the chapter, trust in various institutions fell drastically following the financial crisis. Trust in the media was not measured regularly in Iceland before the crisis, but Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir [Market and Media Research] has measured trust in the media since December 2008 (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir, n.d.). At this time, only 23 per cent of Icelanders said that they trusted the media as a whole. Seven other institutions were less trusted, including the government (19%), the parliament (18%), the Financial Supervisory Authority (5%), and the banking system (5%). In a comparable survey conducted in May 2009 (following the “pots and pans” protests and the fall of the government in February of the same year), trust in the media as a whole had fallen from 23 per cent to 15 per cent. In the years following, trust in the media has never reached higher than 19 per cent (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

Trust in “the media” or “the press” as an institution is one thing, and trust in individual media outlets is another. As seen in Table 3.1, trust in most individual Icelandic outlets is considerably higher than in the media as a whole from 2009–2016. Trust in RÚV has remained consistently the highest during this whole period, from 69–79 per cent.

Table 3.1 Trust in Icelandic media outlets (per cent)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
RÚV news	70	79	72	75	77	71	69
Channel 2 news	36	44	42	45	44	41	41
Mbl	54	52	50	51	50	47	41
Morgunblaðið	52	46	43	45	46	41	37
Fréttablaðið	34	35	37	41	39	35	30
Vísir	24	30	33	35	35	34	33
Viðskiptablaðið	22	26	26	33	31	26	27
Stundin	–	–	–	–	–	–	26
Kjarninn	–	–	–	–	–	27	31
DV	4	9	9	10	10	14	7

Comments: The figures show the share of respondents who state they trust the outlets “very much” or “fairly much”. Figures following 2016 have not been released by the company at the time of writing.

Source: Market and Media Research, n.d.

Iceland: A (not so) Nordic system?

Nordic media is often used as an example of media industries that have been able to provide users with socially relevant content and at the same time flourish as successful businesses. Furthermore, Nordic citizens repeatedly rank high in international comparisons of political knowledge (Curran et al., 2009; McQuail, 1992). The media system in Iceland has in many respects developed in a way

similar to the other Nordic countries, but there are also important differences (see Skogerbø et al., Chapter 1).

Harðarson (2008) previously analysed the Icelandic media system, using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework, and placed the country within the democratic corporatist model. He made a distinction between the old system, which in some ways shared features with the polarised pluralist model, and the new media system of the twenty-first century, which "clearly has moved towards the liberal model in many respects" (Harðarson, 2008: 79). Other Nordic academics have argued that neoliberalism has been more influential in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries and that its media system has moved closer to the liberal model (Ahva et al., 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Corporatism is less developed in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries, as outlined earlier in the chapter in relation to Icelandic politics. State involvement has been limited to RÚV whilst all other media outlets are based on commercial grounds. Private media has not been subject to regulation or requirements aimed at ensuring media pluralism and public service journalism, like private media in the other Nordic countries has (Guðmundsson & Kristinsson, 2019; Harðarson, 2008; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018; Karlsson & Broddason, 2018). The press does not receive any direct subsidies, and the state's involvement in the newspaper industry has been very limited. "To this extent, Iceland does not fit into the model of an active state vis-a-vis the media that is commonly used to describe the Nordic media system", according to Ohlsson (2015: 27).

Karlsson (2004: 227–228) notes that in Iceland "there has strangely enough been virtually unanimous agreement across the political spectrum from the right to the left, contending that the press and the private media in general should be left to themselves". Before the 2008 financial crisis, that was also the prevalent view of private media companies and the Union of Icelandic Journalists. However, this view has changed. A committee established in December 2016 to examine the economic situation of private media in Iceland concluded that it was worrying in light of the media's important role in democratic societies; the committee put forward several proposals to ease the difficulties (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2018). In autumn 2019, legislation proposing press subsidies for private media was tabled in the parliament. According to the bill, news media companies that fulfil certain requirements, such as publishing regularly for the general public, producing diverse content of societal importance, and reporting original content at least in part, will be eligible for a refund of up to 18 per cent of their production cost (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2019). The ministry looked to the arrangement of press subsidies in the other Nordic countries. The new bill would constitute a major change in Icelandic media policy. It was met with considerable opposition, both from parties outside the government, as well as from the Independence Party, one of the three parties currently in

government. The bill did not become law before the parliamentary recess in early summer of 2020.

There are indications of increased partisanship – or instrumentalisation – of the media in the last decade. Owners of private media companies have openly claimed that their objective was to influence public opinion. In 2009, a group of investors with interests in the fishing industry acquired the publishing company Árvakur. In an interview, a shareholder stated that an objective of the investment was to influence public debates and political decisions. Another example is the decision by Exista (a big investment company) in 2007 to invest in the business paper *Viðskiptablaðið*. One of the owners claimed this was necessary, as almost all other media outlets were in the hands of two other main business blocks (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

Guðmundsson (2013) argues that elements of political parallelism have carried over into the new era of commercial media. The perception of a connection between traditional media and political parties is deep-rooted, and politicians in particular appear to have very little confidence in journalistic professionalism or the impartiality of the news media. Guðmundsson (2013: 510) also states that the historical proximity of political parallelism, a relatively recent professionalisation of journalists, an unregulated media environment, and an “extreme ownership concentration of the media, where ownership powers and political parties became mixed with each other”, have led to the development of a “politically commercial media system”. Ohlsson and Facht (2017: 93) also remark that the Icelandic media market is “characterised by a comparatively tight bond between the political sphere and the domestic enterprise sector” and associations with external stakeholders contribute “to the relationships in the media market being more problematic than they are in the other Nordic countries”.

Iceland has a history of the state playing a large role in the economy (Kristinsson, 1996), just like the states in polarised pluralist countries in Southern Europe. A weak media regulatory body is another element Iceland has in common with polarised pluralist countries (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). The Icelandic Media Commission has broad functions and duties but has been underfinanced and understaffed from the very beginning: its board of five and staff of three are responsible for supervising the Icelandic media market, both private media and RÚV, in accordance with Iceland’s media legislation. This includes collecting and publishing data about the media market as well as handling complaints about the conduct of individual media outlets. The commission’s role is also to promote media literacy and diversity in the media and to guard freedom of speech and the public’s right to information, to name but a few of its many duties (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

RÚV holds a very strong position in the media market in Iceland, appears to retain a high level of legitimacy, and enjoys far more trust than other me-

dia in Iceland, as outlined earlier. Hallin and Mancini (2004: 167) posit that the Nordic countries tend to organise their public service companies in “the direction of the professional model, according to which the running of Public Service Broadcasting is left to professionals in order to avoid political involvement”. Moe and Mjøs (2013: 88) also argue that the “running and supervision of Public Service Broadcasting in the Nordic countries are characterized, although in different ways and to varying degrees, by a separation between the institutions and the political powers”. However, these studies did not include Iceland, and Jóhannsdóttir (2019) argues that the Icelandic system of broadcast governance, in effect, resembles more what Hallin and Mancini (2004: 48) call the “government model”.

RÚV enjoys less institutional autonomy than public service broadcasting companies in the other Nordic countries and has been subject to more political interference. Policy and regulations around the Nordic public service broadcasting companies have generally been rather stable, whereas legislation regarding RÚV has been subject to frequent changes, depending on the composition of the political majority in parliament at the time (Karlsson & Broddason, 2018). Kristinsson’s (2012) study of party patronage in Iceland illustrates attempts by political parties to gain control over not just RÚV but also private media companies, since the media is seen as being of strategic importance in politics. RÚV was made a state-owned limited company in 2013. This was said to increase its autonomy from the legislative and executive powers. However, some argue that the change from a license fee to a broadcasting tax to finance RÚV’s operations has created a very unclear situation for the company and made it more dependent on the state (Engblom, 2013).

Political communication research in Iceland

We have outlined differences between Iceland and the other four Nordic countries in terms of its media and political systems. Another important difference concerns the few political communication studies in Iceland when compared to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. It is difficult to define specific theoretical perspectives in existing research in Iceland, since political communication is a minor field of study in the country. The same applies to studies of media and communications more generally.

Much of the scarce political communication research that does exist has focused on mapping the structural landscape and, to some extent, catching up with foundational research that has been carried out in the other Nordic countries in recent years. In relation to this, Icelandic academics have used the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) to analyse the political and media systems in Iceland and how they differ from those in the other Nordic countries (Guðmundsson,

2013; Harðarson, 2008; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018). Jóhannsdóttir's (2019) findings suggest that the Icelandic media system does not fit neatly with any of the three models in Hallin and Mancini's typology and is best described as a mixed case or a hybrid system (see also Guðmundsson, 2019).

Three studies have been conducted that examine media content in Iceland through the frameworks of soft news and entertainment, and hard news. Karlsson (2004) found that commercialisation had increased considerably around the turn of the century, not least due to the arrival of free papers, and argued that this had led to a definite trend towards more entertainment news. Guðmundsson (2012) came to a similar conclusion in a study of the three main Icelandic newspapers published from 2008–2010. The proportion of soft news in major printed newspapers had increased considerably from previous years. The findings from a study of hard and soft news coverage in *Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið*, and their online counterparts, indicated that the daily press published less political and economic news in 2013 than in 2005, whereas the amount of soft news had increased significantly, particularly online (Jóhannsdóttir, 2018).

Election coverage has only been examined in one study. In her analysis of the 2013 parliamentary election coverage, Kolbeins (2016) found a clear tendency for horse-race stories. Guðmundsson (2013) also examined the 2013 elections, but his focus was on examining political candidates' attitudes towards political parallelism and professionalism in the media. His findings suggest that politicians have little faith in professionalisation, impartiality, and balance in the news media in Iceland. In a recent study of how political candidates assessed and used different types of social, local, and news media for election campaign purposes, Guðmundsson (2019) found that several types of media logics coexisted. The study sought to unveil the use of Snapchat in relation to other media and disclosed clear age differences in use; but, candidates' use of Snapchat and other social media did not preclude valuing traditional media highly and vice versa.

Another area of study concerns journalists. Professionalism in journalism began to develop in Iceland somewhat later than in the other Nordic countries. The reasons are primarily rooted in the stronghold of the party press, which meant that politics and political views were an important indicator of a person's ability to work in the media, whilst professionalism was not held in particularly high regard in the field. This changed rapidly as the politicians' hold on the media began to weaken (Guðmundsson, 2013). The education of journalists has greatly improved, and just over two-thirds of Icelandic journalists have a university degree (Kolbeins, 2012); however, in an international context, this is not particularly high. Data from the Worlds of Journalism Study shows that in 53 of the 67 countries studied, 75 per cent or more of the journalists have some form of university education. Furthermore, formal education in journalism is not nearly as common in the Icelandic media as it is in the other Nordic countries. A quarter of Icelandic journalists have a formal degree in journalism or media

studies, compared to 56 per cent in Finland, 64 per cent in Norway, 68 per cent in Sweden, and 82 per cent in Denmark (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2018).

According to Ahva and colleagues (2017), journalists in Iceland (like their Nordic colleagues) consider objective reporting to be very important in their work and see themselves as detached watchdogs. Their professional identity is also one of autonomy, experiencing little influence from politics or economic forces in their daily work (Ahva et al., 2017; Kolbeins, 2012; Nord, 2008). Guðmundsson and Kristinsson (2019: 1700) showed that although oriented towards public service, journalists “are undermined by the realities of the media market”. They identified four factors that intensified the pressure journalists experience in their everyday work, including the technological competence required, increasing time spent on interacting with users, the growing professionalisation of special interests and public relations pushing content to the media, and, not least, the increasing competition and commercialisation pushing journalists to consider what might sell. The authors conclude, as do Strömback and Karlsson (2011) in their study, that the changes in the news media environment may have decreased journalists’ influence over their own practices and increased the influence of media owners.

Journalists in small media systems can be seen to be less autonomous than journalists in larger countries. Small audience markets and small advertising markets translate into small job markets, which in general means fewer employers, fewer senior positions, and fewer alternatives in terms of career routes and progression (Örnebring & Lauk, 2010). All Icelandic media companies are small in international comparison, and as Harðarson (2008: 80) states, “staff-shortages seriously limit Icelandic journalists’ possibilities for high-class journalism”. Journalists are seldom specialists, which may make them more dependent on their sources, including high-level politicians, and the small job market can make them less resistant to commercial pressures and ownership power.

Ólafsson (2019) conducted 50 interviews with Icelandic politicians and journalists in Iceland and surveyed the public. His work focuses on examining perceptions concerning routine political coverage in the Icelandic media, the relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland, as well as interactions between journalists, politicians, and the public on social media, particularly Facebook. The study illustrates how Iceland’s smallness impacts political dissemination and that existing political communication frameworks need to be expanded in order to examine the Icelandic case and other small states, both offline and online. Moreover, Ólafsson shows how small states like Iceland can be seen as particularly exaggerated cases concerning recent media and political developments (Ólafsson, 2020). As such, they can provide us with important clues concerning where the larger democracies of the world are heading.

Conclusion

We have illustrated that the Icelandic system is unlike the systems in the other four Nordic countries in several ways. To some extent, it can be described as a hybrid of the three models identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004). The available studies and data paint a picture of a highly commercial media system with less developed journalistic professionalism than in the liberal countries and without the public service requirements and public support of private media that characterise the democratic corporatist countries. Remnants of political parallelism from the past have carried over to a new liberal media system. Iceland also shares similarities with polarised pluralist countries when it comes to a weak media regulatory body and a tight bond between the political and business spheres.

Political communication research in Iceland is scarce. There are few Icelanders who study media and communication, and political scientists in Iceland have focused little on studies of political communication. Another challenge for research in Iceland concerns the lack of available data. Statistics concerning the structure and development of the media industry are more limited in Iceland than in many other European countries. Public authorities do not monitor the media market to the extent that other Nordic countries do, nor has the industry itself agreed upon the gathering of common key indicators (Ohlsson, 2017). Yet another challenge is that Iceland is routinely ignored in comparative research. It was, for example, the only Nordic state left out of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) study, and it is also the only Nordic state excluded from the annual *Reuters Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2020).

There are many important areas of future research on the Icelandic case. Since this is an anthology on the developments in the Nordic countries, we would like to encourage Nordic scholars to include Iceland in their future studies. Political communication research concerning all aspects of it is needed. In particular, we would highlight that more studies should be directed towards the impact Iceland's smallness has on political dissemination and the media market. If press subsidies for private media outlets are taken up in Iceland, it is important to examine the impact that they have. This is an area that would be interesting for us to study in collaboration with Nordic colleagues. We are living in times of great change when it comes to public service broadcasters and the digital landscape, which would also be an interesting area to explore in collaboration with academics in the Nordic countries. Iceland is a case that differs to some extent from the other four Nordic countries, and we hope that future research including this small state will enrich the political communication discipline, both from a Nordic perspective and more generally.

Notes

1. <https://www.visir.is>
2. <https://www.frettabladid.is>
3. <https://www.dv.is>
4. <https://hringbraut.frettabladid.is/>
5. <https://www.mbl.is>
6. <https://www.stundin.is>
7. <https://www.kjarninn.is>

References

- Act no. 38. (2011). *Media act*. Reykjavík: Alþingi. <https://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2011038.html>
- Act no. 54. (2013). *Act on changes to the media act no. 38/2011 (Ownership rules and improvements)*. Reykjavík: Alþingi. <https://www.althingi.is/altext/stjt/2013.054.html>
- Ahva, L., van Dalen, A., Hovden, J. F., Kolbeins, G. H., Nilsson, M. L., Skovsgaard, M., & Välvirronen, J. (2017). A welfare state of mind? Nordic journalists' conception of their role and autonomy in international context. *Journalism Studies*, 18(5), 595–613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1249005>
- Bakker, P. (2008). The simultaneous rise and fall of free and paid newspapers in Europe. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 427–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780802281164>
- Bakker, P. (2013). The life cycle of a free newspaper business model in newspaper-rich markets. *Journalistica: Tidskrift for Forskning i Journalistik*, 7(1), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.7146/journalistica.v7i1.15802>
- Bernburg, J. G. (2016). *Economic crisis and mass protest: The pots and pans revolution in Iceland*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315578699>
- Bjarnason, T. (2014). Traust í kreppu: Traust til Alþingis, lögreglu, stjórnámálmanna og forseta Íslands í kjölfar hrunsins [Trust during crisis: Trust in parliament, the police, politicians and the president of Iceland following the collapse]. *Íslenska þjóðfélagið*, 5(2), 19–38. <http://www.thjodfelagid.is/index.php/Th/article/view/67>
- Broddason, P., & Karlsson, R. (2005). Medien in Island [The media in Iceland]. In Hans-Bredow-Institut, *Internationales handbuch medien 2004/2005 [International Handbook of Media 2004/2005]* (pp. 346–367). Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Curran, J., Iyengar, S., Lund, A. B., & Salovaara-Moring, I. (2009). Media system, public knowledge and democracy: A comparative study. *European Journal of Communication*, 24(1), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323108098943>
- Engblom, L.-Å. (2013). Public service financing in the Nordic countries. In U. Carlsson (Ed.), *Public service media from a Nordic horizon: Politics, markets, programming and users* (pp. 93–106). Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Friðriksson, G. (2000). *Nýjustu fréttir: Saga fjölmiðlunar á Íslandi frá upphafi til vorra daga [The latest news: The history of the media in Iceland]*. Reykjavík: Iðunn.
- Gallup (2020). *Traust til stofnana [Trust in institutions]*. Reykjavík: GI Rannsóknir ehf. <https://www.gallup.is/nidurstodur/thjodarpuls/traust-til-stofnana/>
- Guðmundsson, B. (2006). The role of local media in sustaining viability in rural and smaller regional communities in Iceland. In E. Aradóttir (Ed.), *Nordic-Scottish university network for rural and regional development* [Proceedings of NSN's annual conference, Sept. 22–25, 2005, Akureyri, Iceland] (pp. 147–159). University of Akureyri.
- Guðmundsson, B. (2009). Traust á sögulegum grunni: Rannsókn á fréttareglum Ríkisútvarpsins [Trust on historical grounds: A study on the news guidelines at the National Broadcasting Service]. *Stjórnmal & stjórnsýsla*, 5(2), 295–310. <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/9116>
- Guðmundsson, B. (2012). Umræðuvettvangur íslenskra dagblaða með hliðsjón af greiningarramma Colin Sparks [Icelandic newspapers in light of Colin Sparks's model of different types of press]. *Stjórnmal & stjórnsýsla*, 8(2), 323–342. <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/14847>
- Guðmundsson, B. (2013). Pólitísk markaðsfjölmiðlun [A politically commercial media system]. *Stjórnmal & stjórnsýsla*, 9(2), 509–530. <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/22387>

- Guðmundsson, B. (2019). Logics of the Icelandic hybrid media system: Snapchat and media-use before the 2016 and 2017 Althing elections. *Nordicom Review*, 40(1), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2019-0001>
- Guðmundsson, B., & Kristinsson, S. (2019). Journalistic professionalism in Iceland: A framework for analysis and an assessment. *Journalism*, 20(12), 1684–1703. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917695416>
- Guðmundsson, B. P. (2017, September 7). Sigurður kaupir DV í fjórða sinn [Sigurður buys DV for the fourth time]. *RÚV*. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/sigurdur-kaupir-dv-i-fjorda-sinn>
- Guðmundsson, F. P. (2016). Iceland's media market after the collapse of 2008: Fewer journalists – lighter material. *Nordicom Information*, 38(1), 41–45.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>
- Hallin, D. C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: Southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 175–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344370202400202>
- Harðarson, Ó. P. (2008). Media and politics in Iceland. In J. Strömbäck, M. Ørsten, & T. Aalberg (Eds.), *Communicating politics: Political communication in the Nordic countries* (pp. 63–82). Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Harrie, E. (2017). *Newspapers in the Nordic media landscape 2017*. Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Indriðason, I. H., Önnudóttir, E. H., Þórisdóttir, H., & Harðarson, Ó. (2017). Re-electing the culprits of the crisis? Elections in the aftermath of a recession. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 40(1), 28–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12081>
- Internet World Stats. (2019). Internet in Europe stats. <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>
- Johnsen, G. (2014). *Bringing down the banking system: Lessons from Iceland*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://www.doi.org/10.1057/9781137347350>
- Jóhannesson, G. T. (2009). *Hrunið: Ísland á barmi gjaldþrots og upplausnar upplausnar* [The collapse: Iceland on the brink of bankruptcy and chaos]. Reykjavík: JPV.
- Jóhannsdóttir, V. (2015). Women in journalism: The situation in Iceland. *Nordicom Information*, 37(2), 33–40.
- Jóhannsdóttir, V. (2018). Commercialization in the Icelandic press: An analysis of hard and soft news in major print and online media in Iceland in times of change. *Journalism*, 1–17. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918768494>
- Jóhannsdóttir, V. (2019). *The state of the Icelandic news media in the beginning of the 21st century* [Doctoral dissertation, Roskilde University, Denmark].
- Jóhannsdóttir, V., & Ólafsson, J. G. (2018). The Icelandic news media in times of crisis and change. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 14(1), 189–210. <https://doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2018.14.1.9>
- Jónsson, Á. (2009). *Why Iceland? How one of the world's smallest countries became the meltdown's biggest casualty*. London: McGraw Hill Professional.
- Jónsson, Á., & Sigurgeirsson, H. (2017). *The Icelandic financial crisis: A study into the world's smallest currency area and its recovery from total banking collapse*. London: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-39455-2>
- Jónsson, G. (2014). Iceland and the Nordic model of consensus democracy. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 39(4), 510–528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2014.935473>
- Karlsson, R. (2004). Iceland: Mapping the newspaper market 1980–2003. In B. Schneider, & W. Schütz (Eds.), *Europäische Pressemärkte* [European press markets] (pp. 223–263). Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Karlsson, R. (2009). Þróun fjölmiðlamarkaðarins, Frumvarp til laga um fjölmiðla, Fylgiskjal I, þingskjal 740–423 mál. 202–372 [Media bill: The development of the media market. Appendix 1]. <https://www.althingi.is/altext/139/s/0215.html>
- Karlsson, R., & Broddason, Þ. (2018). Íslenska fjölmiðlakerfið: Markaður, stjórnmál og völd [The Icelandic media system: Market, politics and power]. In V. Árnason, & H. A. Henrysson

- (Eds.), *Hvað einkennir íslenskt lýðræði?* [What defines Icelandic democracy?] (pp. 171–211). Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.
- Kolbeins, G. H. (2012). Siðferði og starfshættir íslenskra blaða- og fréttamanna [Ethics and working practices of Icelandic journalists]. Þjóðarspegginn 2012. Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XIII [Conference in social sciences].
- Kolbeins, G. H. (2015). Icelandic media firms viewed from the perspective of agency theory. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 11(1), 1–20.
- Kolbeins, G. H. (2016). Public opinion polls and experts in election news. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 12(1), 127–150.
- Kristinsson, G. H. (1996). Parties, states and patronage. *West European Politics*, 19(3), 433–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402389608425145>
- Kristinsson, G. H. (2012). Party patronage in Iceland: Rewards and control appointments. In P. Kopecký, P. Mair, & M. Spirova (Eds.), *Party patronage and party government in European democracies* (pp. 186–205). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kristinsson, G. H. (2018). The Icelandic power structure revisited. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 12(1), 1–34.
- Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir [Market and media research] (n.d.). *Traust til fjölmiðla*. [Trust in media]. Reykjavík: Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir ehf. <https://mmr.is/frettir/birtarnieurstoeur/588-traust-til-fjolmidla>
- McQuail, D. (1992). *Media performance: Mass communication and the public interest*. London: Sage.
- Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið. (2018). Rekstrarumhverfi fjölmiðla: Tillögur nefndar um bætt rekstrarumhverfi einkarekinna fjölmiðla [The media environment: Suggestions on improved conditions for privately owned media outlets]. Reykjavík: Menntamálaráðuneytið.
- Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið. (2019). Drög að frumvarpi til laga um breytingu á lögum um fjölmiðla, nr. 38/2011 (stuðningur við öflun og miðlun fréttu, fréttatengds efnis o.fl.) [Draft bill concerning changes to the media act, no. 38/2011 (support for gathering and disseminating news, news related content etc.)]. [https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/\\$Cases/Details/?id=1293](https://samradsgatt.island.is/oll-mal/$Cases/Details/?id=1293)
- Moe, H., & Mjøs, O. J. (2013). The arm's length principle in Nordic public broadcasting regulation. In U. Carlsson (Ed.), *Public service media from a Nordic horizon: Politics, markets, programming and users* (pp. 75–106). Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Simge, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2019*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf
- Nord, L. (2008). Comparing Nordic media systems: North between west and east? *Central European Journal of Communication*, 1(1), 95–110.
- Ohlsson, J. (2015). *The Nordic media market 2015*. Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Ohlsson, J., & Facht, U. (2017). *Ad wars: Digital challenges for ad-financed news media in the Nordic countries*. Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Ólafsdóttir, K., & Ólafsson, S. (2014). *Economy, politics and welfare in Iceland – booms, busts and challenges* [Nordmod 2030: Sub-report. 4. Fafo-report]. <https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2014/20360.pdf>
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2019). *Media, democracy and small states: Political communication in Iceland* [Doctoral dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London, England].
- Ólafsson, J. G. (2020). Factoring size into the equation: Media studies, politics, and small states. *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, 2(1), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2020-0013>
- Önnudóttir, E. H., & Harðarson, Ó. P. (2018). Political cleavages, party voter linkages and the impact of voters' socio-economic status on vote-choice in Iceland, 1983–2016/17. *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*, 14(1), 101–130.
- Örnebring, H., & Lauk, E. (2010). *Does size matter? Journalistic values and working conditions in small countries* [Conference presentation]. 2010 ECREA Conference, Hamburg, Germany.
- RÚV. (2015). Ársskýrsla 2014/2015 [Annual Report 2014/15]. Reykjavík: RÚV.
- Schweizer, C., & Puppis, M. (2017). Public service media in the 'network' era: A comparison of remits, funding, and debate in 17 Countries. In F. G. Lowe, H. Van den Bulck, & K. Donders

- (Eds.), *Public service media in the networked society* (pp. 109–214). Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- Statistics Iceland. (2017a). *Parliamentary election October 28th 2017*. Reykjavík: Statistics Iceland. <https://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/elections/general-elections-to-the-althingi-28-october-2017/>
- Statistics Iceland. (2017b). *Advertisement revenue of the media halved since 2007 in real prices*. Reykjavík: Statistics Iceland. <https://statice.is/publications/news-archive/media/advertising-revenue-of-the-media-1996-2015/>
- Statistics Iceland. (2018). *The public service broadcaster holds 21 per cent of the total media revenue in 2016*. Reykjavík: Statistics Iceland. <https://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/media/media-revenue-2016/>
- Statistics Iceland. (n.d.). *Population by municipality, sex, citizenship and quarters 2010–2017*. Reykjavík: Statistics Iceland.
- Strömbäck, J., & Karlsson, M. (2011). Who's got the power? Journalists' perceptions of changing influences over the news. *Journalism Practice*, 5(6), 643–656. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2011.592348>
- Syvvertsen, T., Mjøs, O. J., Enli, G., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.