

Watchdogs and government megaphones

The dual democratic roles of the news media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Iceland and Sweden

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights two democratic roles of the news media during a crisis: to provide important information and to be a critical voice of decisions made by those in power. In this chapter, we examine how the media in Iceland and Sweden conveyed authorities' messages and to what extent the authorities' actions were questioned. The study is based on content analysis of news reports collected during the first year of the pandemic (2020). Our findings show that reporting largely followed an informative discourse and that health and economy were the dominant themes. Authorities in both countries relied heavily on experts to convey information, which was reflected in the news coverage. Critical reporting on the implemented strategies and protective measures was limited, more so in Iceland than in Sweden, but the consequences of the pandemic were clearly more dire in the latter context. Discourses in both countries were more national than international, with only few references made to other countries, including Nordic neighbours.

Keywords: crisis communication, media coverage of Covid-19, democratic roles of the news media, news reporting, content analysis

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Introduction

A cornerstone of crisis communication is to deliver compelling and coherent messages to affected citizens about what is at stake, the causes of the crisis, and what actions should be taken (Boin et al., 2016; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1). In the first phases of an emergency, the need for authorities to communicate coincides with news media logic that prioritises unexpected and sensational events with negative elements and high public interest, and hence crises tend to receive intense media coverage early on (Houston et al., 2018). But the communicative model of crisis management may eventually contrast with the democratic roles of the media in society – to describe and explain events from more than one perspective by giving voices to opposing opinions or through investigative journalism (Asp, 2007; Curran, 2002). During societal crises, the media is expected to convey important information to the public from government and expert agencies, but not simply disseminate this information without critically examining it. Journalism should also provide citizens with relevant knowledge that enables them to hold the responsible politicians and authorities to account. Finally, when a particular crisis ends, or at least is under control, people need information to help them process what has happened, to recover, and return to normal conditions (Odén et al., 2016). The news media thus has a fundamental role in society's crisis communication: in the short term, to mitigate humanitarian and economic consequences of the crisis at hand and keep responsible authorities accountable; and in the long term, to contribute to society's resilience and capacity to withstand new and unexpected disruptions (Boin et al., 2016).

Iceland and Sweden represent a particularly interesting comparison concerning crisis management and Covid-19 restrictions, as the two countries took different approaches than their Nordic counterparts (and most other Western countries). Both states relied heavily on public health authorities, and politicians largely followed their recommendations. The key difference between the two states is that the minister of health had the final say in Iceland (Ólafsson, 2021b), whereas the lack of a specific law on crisis management outside of wartime in Sweden hindered the government from imposing harsh restrictions (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). The two countries never went as far in restrictions as most other Western states, with Iceland following partial restrictions (e.g., a ban on large gatherings, but never a complete lockdown) and Sweden relying mainly on recommendations. Despite these similarities, the outcomes in the two countries varied drastically. By October 2021, the number of infected persons per million inhabitants in Sweden was more than three times higher than in Iceland, and the number of Covid-19-related deaths was 15 times higher (Worldometers, 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1).

In this chapter, we seek to compare and evaluate how the Icelandic and Swedish news media fulfilled their informative and investigative roles during the

first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020), when both countries experienced two severe waves of infections. Building on data collection from two research projects – one in Iceland and the other in Sweden – not harmonised from the beginning, we acknowledge that the data is not completely comparable. Yet, to our knowledge, this is the only data available to provide insights into the news coverage in the two countries, and we have used measures that are largely comparable. However, it is important to keep in mind that, in some cases, it is not possible to provide direct comparisons. Yet, we argue that our analysis provides us with important, albeit cautious, insights into the discourse in the two contexts. Consequently, we view our analysis as a first step toward a comparative research agenda on media discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nordics, and we argue that the insights we provide can offer important information on how to design and implement studies that are coordinated across contexts from the beginning. In this chapter, we address the following research questions:

- RQ1. How much attention did the Icelandic and Swedish news media give to the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020?
- RQ2. What defined the content of Covid-19 coverage in the Icelandic and Swedish news media, in terms of main actors, themes, and countries covered?
- RQ3. To what extent did the Icelandic and Swedish Covid-19 news reporting contain criticism?

Our focus on the amount of news coverage, themes, and countries provides an understanding of the informative role of the news media during the period under study, whilst the emphasis on actors and criticism illustrates the investigative role of the news media. While the media landscape in the two countries is largely similar – both in terms of roles and functions (Therrien, 2018) – the developments and outcomes of the pandemic varied drastically. Consequently, we would expect the media discourse in the two countries to differ.

Using secondary data, we focus on and compare how the Icelandic and Swedish news media framed the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it was handled. The comparison is based on a selection of key variables. First, the news value of the events is compared by mapping the amount of reporting: Did the media in Iceland and Sweden pay the same amount of attention to the pandemic during the same time periods in 2020? Second, we identify the actors that were given a voice in the media most often, and through that, given the opportunity to frame the portrayal of the pandemic. Third, we evaluate which themes dominated the discourse in the two countries and the extent to which the coverage was similar or different. After that, the degree of criticism in the reporting is compared:

Given the different outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic between the two countries in 2020, was the Swedish media discourse more critical than the Icelandic? Finally, whether the domestic situation was put into perspective by news reports from other countries is compared: To what extent did the Icelandic and Swedish news media report on pandemic mitigation in other countries, specifically their Nordic neighbours, where severer restrictions were imposed and – compared with Sweden – with considerably milder consequences? This study also extends the comparison of media content to late 2020, thus including a longer period than previous Nordic studies on media reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic (cf. Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Hansson et al., 2021). By comparing the discourse in this way, we are able to provide an evaluation of how the media in Iceland and Sweden fulfilled their informative and investigative roles. Specifically, the coding of themes and the reliance on public authorities indicate provision of information, whereas the coding of how many different voices and criticism appeared give insights into the investigative roles.

The democratic roles of the news media during crisis

The news media in democratic societies have two fundamental roles. One is to provide citizens with information on public affairs issues so they can orient themselves in society and make rational decisions. The other is to scrutinise authorities and to provide citizens with a basis for making independent assessments of government and those in power (Asp, 2007; Curran, 2002; Schudson, 2008).

Even when applied to situations of societal crisis, journalism has both an informative and investigative role. In critical situations, when human lives or property values are at stake, for example, the media has the potential to reach a large audience very quickly. At this stage, the primary purpose of both media and authorities is to warn the public and inform about dangers and how to protect oneself and get help. A relationship of both cooperation and dependency arises as the authorities constitute the most initiated news sources and the media the most effective channel of information dissemination (Vultee & Wilkins, 2012). From a citizen perspective, communication should enable relevant interpretations and sense-making of the crisis and appropriate protective measures to be taken.

As the crisis stabilises, however, and the authorities' actions aim at recovery and mitigation, the media is expected to take on its other role and to hold those responsible of handling the crisis to account, give a voice to those affected, and make the consequences of the crisis visible (Odén et al., 2016). At this point, journalism sets out to answer questions about how the crisis could have happened, if it could have been prevented, and if crisis management should

have been done differently. Consequently, the interests of the news media and authorities often collide (Boin et al., 2016), and tensions arise between how the responsible authorities attempt to frame the crisis and actions of mitigation, and how the news media frames the events (Boin et al., 2009; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Still, from a citizen perspective, the reporting of the news media should enable assessment and accountability of decision-makers involved in the crisis management.

The two roles of the news media generally follow each other chronologically; priority is first given to urgent information, and investigative reporting only comes into play when the consequences of the crisis are calculable, and the crisis is reaching an end (Vultee & Wilkins, 2012). However, the Covid-19 pandemic differs from an expected crisis development in at least two ways. First, infections spread in recurrent waves, which highlighted the informative role of media on numerous acute occasions. Second, the pandemic has been an extended crisis, which may have complicated the media's ability to review what happened and in retrospect investigate how it was handled.

The news media's reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to defining the understanding of the crisis and of the responsible politicians and authorities. How the news media in this way frames a crisis has a strong impact on how people perceive and understand it and how they assess the actions of politicians and authorities responsible for dealing with crises (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Frames refer to the context and particular emphases that news stories convey, and how they focus attention on topics and aspects of a situation, or centre events around a limited number of actors while excluding others. Different frames may interconnect to create a dominant impression of an event (Entman, 1993), and what is left out can be as important as what finds its way into a news story (Iyengar, 1991) (for an analysis of the different *governmental* framing of the pandemic in the Scandinavian countries, see Nord & Olsson Gardell, Chapter 3). The way the Covid-19 pandemic was framed thus reflects how the media balanced the priorities of conveying information that the government wanted disseminated and investigating the authorities' messaging and handling of the pandemic. What information did the news media in Iceland and Sweden provide on what was happening? Which themes – that is, the overall areas of events and conditions regarding the pandemic – dominated the reporting? When and to what extent did the news media question or criticise the experts' recommendations and the authorities' management of the pandemic? And which sources and actors were given priority in the news? Ultimately, the media's framing of the Covid-19 pandemic – and the themes that were present – reflects how they fulfilled their democratic roles during the ongoing crisis.

Representations of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nordic media studies

Several studies on the content of Nordic news media's reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic have been published. Most of them are country specific (Bach, 2020; Bjurwall et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2021; Eriksson & Stenius, 2020; Ghersetti, 2021; Ghersetti & Odén, 2021; Gylfadóttir et al., 2021; Martikainen & Sakke, 2021; Nielbo et al., 2021; Widholm & Mårtenson, 2021), some compare two or more Nordic countries (Baekkeskov et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2021), while others are included in comparative international research (Hansson et al., 2021; Pearman et al., 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, none of them analysed the reporting in relation to the democratic roles of the news media and the communicative needs of citizens during the ongoing crisis. Some of the studies presented in this section sought to identify which actors or perspectives were implicitly assigned the power to interpret and give meaning to what was happening in the news media's representations of the pandemic. One study analysed media content as a reflection of actual consumer behaviour during the pandemic, and others again give more descriptive overviews of actors and themes appearing in the news about the pandemic.

In one of these studies, Benestad Hågvær (2021) conducted a critical discourse analysis of which actors set the framework for how the pandemic should be understood in the Norwegian news media. Building on a "biomediatization" framework (Briggs & Hallin, 2016), Benestad Hågvær found that health institutions, public authorities, and journalists together constructed four different but complementary health-related journalistic discourses: the biomedical discourse, the consumer discourse, the society discourse, and the experience discourse. Implicitly, these actors also constructed understandings of science, family norms, demographic categories, patient role models, and more.

Likewise, in a Finnish study, Martikainen and Sakki (2021) have analysed how photographs in pandemic news reporting constructed subjects' position in different age groups. They identified four stereotyped age group positions in relation to the spreading of infection and upholding of society: children as bystanders, youths as a potential risk (villains), adults as bearing the responsibility (heroes), and elderly as isolated loners (victims). They also noted that the photographs constructed an intergroup divide between adults and the other age groups, designating the power and responsibility of handling the crisis to the former.

Comparing appearances of public leadership in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish news media's reporting of the swine flu in 2009 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Rubin and colleagues (2021) have discovered a shift from expert-driven media performances to political leaders in Norway and Denmark. In the Swedish media, however, health experts and politicians were equally

represented during both pandemics. In an attempt to relate the results to public trust, the researchers suggest that political leadership generated higher trust among the public than leadership that was equally based on political and scientific expertise.

In the studies of Giritli Nygren and Olofsson (2021) and Baekkeskov and colleagues (2021), the focus is less on the actors that shaped the news but rather on the underlying ideologies and perspectives that coined the reporting. Giritli Nygren and Olofsson (2021) studied how the public discourse on the preventive actions implemented in Sweden was narrated in the news media. Combining descriptive and discourse analysis of editorials and debate articles in Sweden's largest morning newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, they examined the development of crisis narratives and the struggle over legitimacy during the first phase of the pandemic. Their conclusion was that the analysed material was coined by underlying ideologies that enhanced the nation-state project and nationalism and a strive for cohesion, even in the contributions made by voices critical of the chosen strategy.

Baekkeskov and colleagues (2021) reached a similar conclusion in their comparative study of how pluralism was represented in Danish and Swedish media content. They found that arguments supporting the selected strategies of the two countries to contain infections were echoed in media reporting, leaving little space in the public debate for dissenting opinions or criticism. In news media reports of the countries' early Covid-19 responses, politicians (in Denmark) and leading experts (in Sweden) dominated the voices that were heard. The study concluded that media reporting favoured a one-policy option and thus tended towards monotony rather than pluralism, which would have required a balanced representation of alternative policies.

A slightly different Finnish study used news media coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic to draw conclusions about the pandemic's impact on grocery traders in the country. Departing from the logic that media attention reflects matters of substantial collective interest, Eriksson and Stenius (2020) identified six thematic consumer reactions in the news media content: panic-buying, changes in cooking behaviour, increased sensitivity towards the shopping environment, switching to online shopping, increased interest for new services, and careless in-store behaviour. Their conclusion was that consumers' grocery shopping behaviour changed substantially in the initial phase of the pandemic, creating stressful conditions for businesses (panic-buying and grocery shortages) as well as new opportunities (online grocery shopping).

In addition to the studies mentioned above, there are also some Swedish studies and one Icelandic study that have used more descriptive approaches to map the media content of the pandemic. In an automated content analysis of 19 Swedish news sites, Dahlgren (2021) found that the dominant topics in the news media during 2020 regarded how the virus should be handled politically

and medically, and how citizens should act. Similar results, with the addition of economic aspects of the pandemic, are found in other content studies from Sweden (Ghersetti, 2021) and Iceland (Gylfadóttir et al., 2021). Swedish studies (Ghersetti & Odén, 2021) also show that the news was alarmist, however, not more alarmist than in the reporting of the swine flu and Ebola, whose consequences in Sweden were not comparable to those of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The literature review presented here indicates that the Nordic news media shaped and framed the reporting about the Covid-19 pandemic – its actors, course, and consequences – in several different ways. However, none of the studies explicitly related the reporting to the communicative needs of citizens and the fundamental democratic roles of news media in crisis situations. Nor did any of them compare how the media fulfilled its democratic roles during the pandemic in Nordic countries with similar conditions for handling the pandemic, but very different outcomes in terms of infections and deaths. In response to this deficiency, in this chapter we attempt to evaluate how the media in Iceland and Sweden fulfilled their dual democratic roles during the pandemic: to provide the public with relevant and timely information and a basis for critically evaluating the actions of responsible politicians and authorities. As the pandemic had a similar development in both countries, and both adopted similar strategies to mitigate infections, we expect public authorities to be a major actor in the reporting. Likewise, we expect the most frequent themes to emphasise health but also give much attention to economics, as both countries highlighted the importance of keeping the economy robust. Given that the number of infected persons was many times higher in Sweden than in Iceland, we also expect the Swedish news media to be more critical of the implemented strategy of pandemic mitigation in comparison with Iceland. Moreover, we expect the Swedish news media to refer more to other countries than the Icelandic media, as there were ample examples that other countries were doing better in fighting the pandemic in general, and especially protecting vulnerable populations, compared with Sweden.

Data and method

The Icelandic data was collected using a database from the company Creditinfo called *Fjölmiðlavaktin* [*The Media Watch*], which consists of media content from all the main Icelandic news media outlets. The data was collected for a research project in Iceland where a stratified sample of media content from 21 Icelandic media outlets containing the words “COVID”, “Wuhan”, or “Kórón*” (the third word including all possible Icelandic versions of the word “corona”) from 1 January to 30 September 2020 has been coded. Large national media companies, as well as smaller and more marginal ones, were included. As the Icelandic

media landscape is quite small, even from a Nordic perspective (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021), it was possible to include a high proportion of news media outlets, resulting in a good reflection of the Icelandic media market.

For comparative purposes with the Swedish case, the scope has been narrowed here to include only the larger national outlets, *Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið* (Iceland's two biggest newspapers); their accompanying websites, *Frettabladid.is* and *Mbl.is*; three outlets from Iceland's largest private news media company, *Stöð 2* (television news), *Visir.is* (website), and Bylgjan (radio station); and four outlets from Iceland's public service broadcaster, RÚV (television station), *RUV.is* (website), and Rás 1 and Rás 2 (two radio stations). Since Icelandic national news outlets are small compared with those in the other Nordic states (Ólafsson, 2020), and therefore often produce fewer news stories, we included a larger number of outlets for the Icelandic case compared with the Swedish one. What is most important is that we relied on similar sources in both countries, but took into account the different media landscapes, most notably regarding size.

The Swedish content analysis was conducted on news reports about Covid-19 in the print editions of *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden's largest morning newspaper) and *Aftonbladet* (largest tabloid newspaper), and in the television news programme *Rapport 19:30* (largest news programme on public service television). The data was originally retrieved over five defined time periods in 2020 for the research programme KRISAMS (www.gu.se/en/research/krisams). All news reports were collected from the digital media archive *Retriver*, using the search terms “corona*” and “COVID*”. In the KRISAMS project, content data was collected for five time-periods during 2020, in parallel with panel surveys that were also conducted.

To be able to compare the data, we used three of the time periods of the Swedish coding which coincided with periods available in the Icelandic dataset. Specifically, the following periods are included in this study: 24 February–9 March (when the first infected cases were registered in both countries); 31 March–14 April (in the middle of the first acute wave of infections and deaths in both countries); and 16 September–30 September (towards the end of the temporary decline in infections and deaths and just before the second big wave took off). From these three periods, every day was selected and coded in Iceland, but every other day in Sweden.

A total of 1,919 news reports were coded for the Icelandic part of the content analysis and a total of 1,189 in Sweden (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Number of coded and analysed Covid-19 news reports in Iceland and Sweden, 2020

	Iceland	Sweden
24 Feb–9 Mar 2020	705	274
31 Mar–14 Apr 2020	560	730
16 Sep–30 Sep 2020	654	185
Total	1,919	1,189

Comments: The data was collected in separate research projects, using somewhat different coding schemes and samples. The Icelandic data is from a stratified sample from 11 of the largest news outlets in Iceland, coded each of the days in question. The Swedish data comes from 3 large news outlets in Sweden, coded every other day.

Three coders conducted the content analysis for the first period in Iceland and five coders for the latter two. To ensure intercoder reliability, all coders coded news reports together to ensure that they coded in the same way. After this was secured, each coder coded independently, yet during the coding process, the same news reports were regularly coded by another coder and results compared to ensure intercoder reliability. Furthermore, the research team met regularly and discussed any uncertainties and debatable questions. The coding for the Swedish data was conducted by one person only. Intra-coding reliability was controlled for each central variable in 10 per cent of all coded news reports (R-test, Cronbach's Alpha) in Sweden, and the statistical correlation ranged between 0.90 and 1.

Statistics on the total number of published news articles about Covid-19 from 1 January to 31 December 2020 in Iceland have been collected from *Fjölmiðlavaktin*. Statistical data on the number of infections during the same period has been collected from the Directorate of Health of Iceland [Embætti landlæknis] (<https://www.landlaeknir.is/english/>) and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management in Iceland [Almannavarnadeild ríkislögreglustjóra] (<https://www.almannavarnir.is/english/>) (see Covid.is, 2021). In addition, statistics on published articles in Sweden's largest daily newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Expressen*) have been collected from the digital media archive *Retriever* for the period of 1 January to 31 December 2020. Statistical data on deaths during the same period has been collected from The Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] (www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se).

For most tables and figures in this study, only news reports with a domestic arena – that is, with a focus on Icelandic and Swedish conditions and the development of the pandemic in the two countries – were selected. For both the Swedish and Icelandic datasets, the presence of critical tone has been classified, the main themes and the most dominating voiced actors, as well as the news

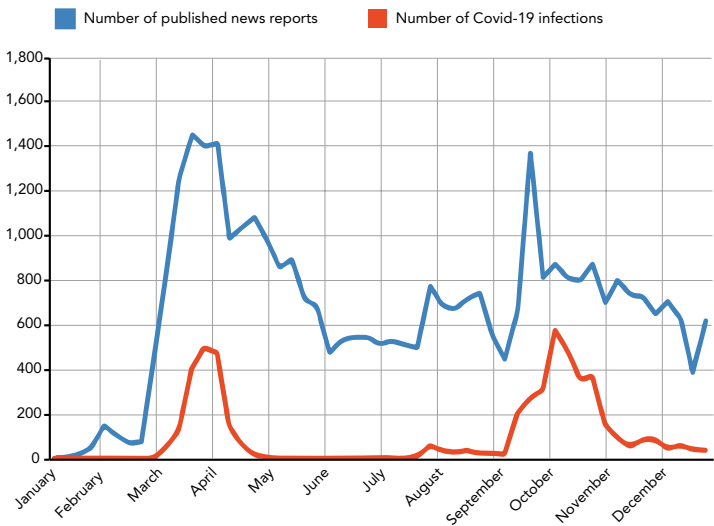
arena (other countries). Since the datasets were originally collected for separate research projects, adjustments have been made in both datasets to make them more comparable with each other. There will, however, inevitably be some limitations with the comparison, since different coding schemes were used.

Media coverage of Covid-19 in Iceland and Sweden

The first step of our analysis is to show the number of news reports published weekly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic during each time period (see Figures 10.1 & 10.2). Given the differences in population and the consequences of the pandemic in the two countries, the figure for Iceland shows the number of new infections per week, but the figure for Sweden shows the number of deaths per week. As an example, the number of deaths from Covid-19 was 9,771 in Sweden in 2020, compared with 29 in Iceland. In addition, the Icelandic public health authorities were much more aggressive in testing than their Swedish counterparts, resulting in numbers of infections being a good proxy for the actual prevalence in the population, where the numbers of deaths are more informative in Sweden. Most importantly, the numbers – despite relying on different indicators in the two countries – clearly illustrate the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and media coverage in the two countries.

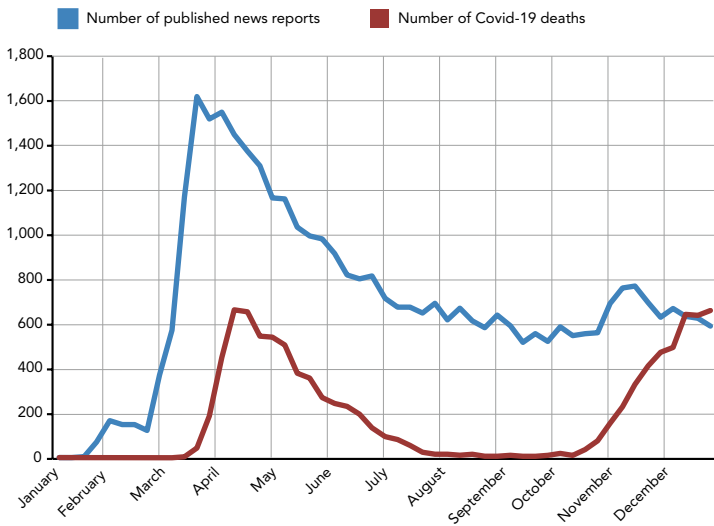
The figures show that coverage about the pandemic accelerated in both countries in late February, coinciding with the first cases diagnosed. This was followed by the most extensive coverage in March, reaching a peak of roughly 1,400 news reports in Iceland and more than 1,600 in Sweden. Interestingly, the coverage continued throughout the summer in both countries, even during times when there were no new cases in Iceland and only few deaths in Sweden. For example, there were still about 600 news stories in Iceland in June and July and similarly about 800 in Sweden in July and August, but Covid-19 cases were virtually absent in Iceland and at a low in Sweden. However, interesting differences between the two countries emerged at the beginning of the second wave: The Icelandic coverage appears to mirror the number of diagnosed cases, while the coverage remains stable in Sweden, even as deaths began to increase again in December and even exceeded death rates from April. Consequently, it seems that as the pandemic progressed in the two countries, the media in Iceland reacted quickly to what was happening, whereas the Swedish news media did not react to the pandemic despite it being clearly more serious in November and December, compared with the preceding months.

Figure 10.1 Number of published news reports and number of new infections per week in Iceland, 2020



Comments: The number of published news reports is determined from news outlets in the database *Fjölmiðlavaktin*. Statistical data on the number of infections has been collected from the Directorate of Health and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management in Iceland (see Covid.is).

Figure 10.2 Number of published news reports and number of deaths per week in Sweden, 2020

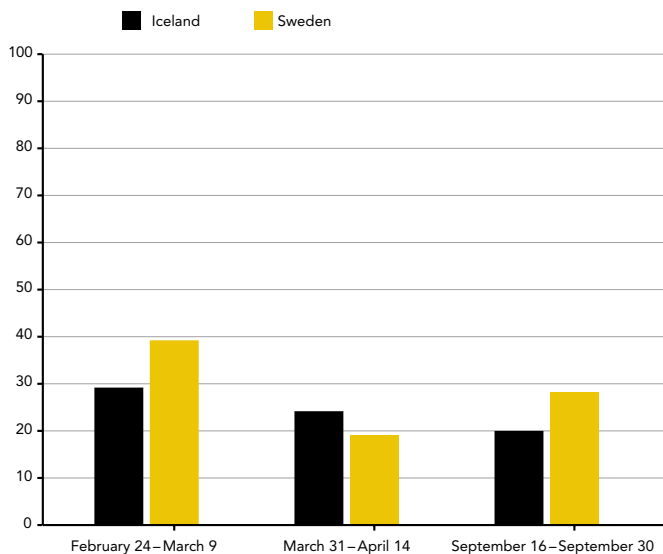


Comments: The number of published news reports is determined from three large news outlets in Sweden (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Rapport 19:30*).

Who was given voice in the media?

One of the key issues during the Covid-19 pandemic across countries was who was given the authority to speak about what was going on and how individuals and countries should respond (for a discussion of how justifying press conferences were used to legitimise the power of authorities to speak about the pandemic, see Kjeldsen, Chapter 5). Not surprisingly, the two key players emerging across nations were politicians and experts. Figure 10.3 shows the proportion of articles that gave a voice to an expert in the two countries, and overall, the Swedish discourse appears to have relied somewhat more on experts, with the exception of the second period. In Iceland, 29 per cent of news reports relied on an expert in the first period, 24 per cent in the second period, and 20 per cent in the third period. Comparable proportions for Sweden are 39 per cent, 19 per cent, and 28 per cent. If we look at individual experts that were given voice in the two countries, the three key players assigned a leading role by the authorities (often referred to as the trio) were most likely to be given voice in Iceland, specifically the director of health, Alma Möller (6%, 3%, 1%), Iceland's director of emergency management, Víðir Reynisson (9%, 2%, 5%), and especially the chief epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason (12%, 7%, 5%).

Figure 10.3 News reports that gave a voice to an expert, 2020 (per cent)

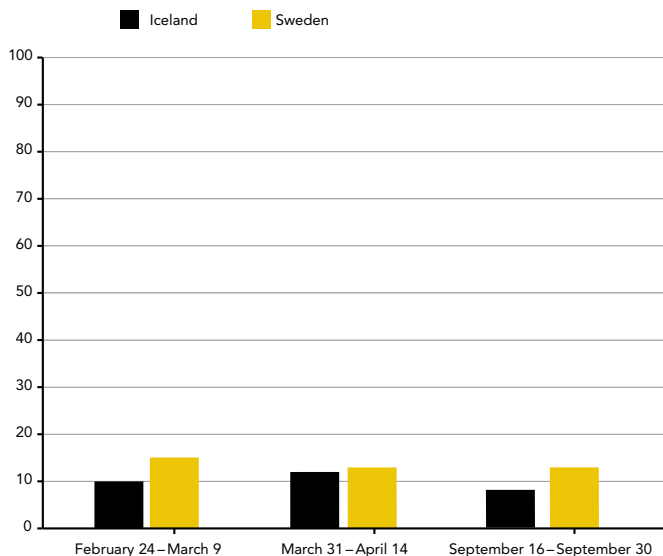


Comments: In the Icelandic news reports, all voiced actors were coded, while the Swedish coding only includes the two most dominating ones. 55 per cent of Swedish articles or news features have two or less voiced actors.

In Sweden, the chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, was most likely to be featured: in more than 8 per cent of articles in the first and third periods, and in about 6 per cent in the second. The second most cited expert, especially in the first period, was Johan Carlson, the director of the Public Health Agency of Sweden (4%, 2%, 2%).

Figure 10.4 shows the same for politicians who appear to have had a slightly larger role in the Swedish discourse compared with the Icelandic. About 10 per cent of the news reports gave a voice to a politician in Iceland in the first period, about 12 per cent in the second, and only 8 per cent in the third. In Sweden, about 15 per cent were given a voice in the first period and roughly 13 per cent in the second and third periods. Iceland's prime minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, was most likely to be featured: in about 3 per cent of Icelandic news stories in the first two periods, but in less than 1 per cent in the third period. All other politicians were given voice in less than 1 per cent of the reports, with the exception of the minister of health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir (1%), the minister of finance, Bjarni Benediktsson (2%), and the minister of justice, Áslaug Arna Sigurbjörnsdóttir (1%) in the second period. In Sweden, the minister for health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, was most likely to be given voice in the first and third periods (7%, 5%), whereas the Swedish prime minister, Steffan Löfven, was given voice in about 6 per cent of news reports in the first period, roughly 4 per cent in the second, and less than 2 per cent in the third. Other politicians in Sweden that were at some point featured in more than 2 per cent of articles were the minister of finance, Magdalena Andersson, and the minister for culture, Amanda Lind. As a caveat, we want to highlight how the different coding of experts and politicians may play a role in our conclusions. The coding was more conservative in Sweden (allowing only two actors) than in Iceland. The fact that the Swedish discourse gave a larger role to experts and politicians (with one exception) indicates that the differences between the countries might have been larger if the Swedish coding had been identical to the Icelandic coding.

Figure 10.4 News reports that gave a voice to politicians, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: In the Icelandic news reports, all voiced actors were coded, while the Swedish coding only includes the two most dominant ones. 55 per cent of Swedish articles or news features have two or less voiced actors.

Which themes dominated the reporting in the two countries?

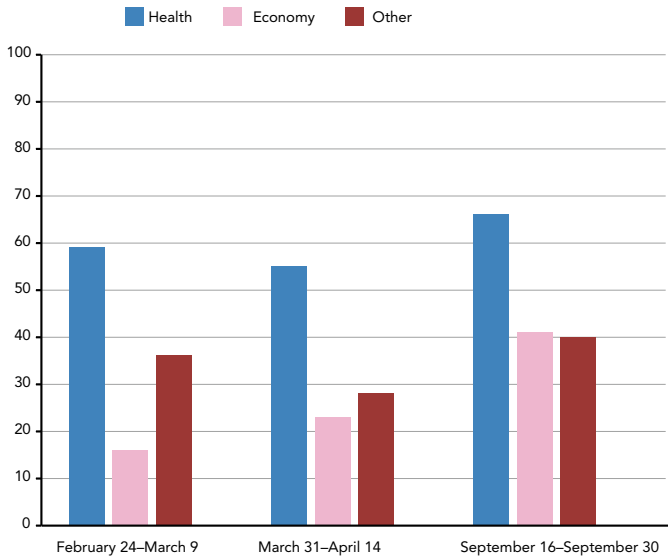
A key question that arises is what themes emerged in the two countries, and specifically, what was being talked about in the news reports focusing on Covid-19. Figures 10.5 and 10.6 show that reports in both countries were most likely to focus on health, but there are some differences between the countries. The coverage in Sweden was overwhelmingly on Covid-19 as a health issue in the first period (89%), while less than 60 per cent of the news stories in Iceland focused on health. Furthermore, the proportion of Swedish reports with a health theme decreased over time, whereas the proportion in Iceland was always between 55 and 67 per cent. The most prominent topics in Iceland concerned disease prevention, the virus itself, the healthcare system, and medical statistics. During the first and third periods, the single issue that received the most attention in Swedish news reports regarded the authorities' handling of the pandemic. Much attention was also paid to the spreading of infection in the first period, coinciding with the beginning of the pandemic. In the second period, in the midst of the first wave, issues concerning the capacity and resources of the healthcare system were highlighted.

The proportion of coverage focusing on economic issues is fairly similar in the two countries and increased over time in both. Specifically, the proportion

for Iceland is 17 per cent in the first period, 23 per cent in the second period, and 41 per cent in the third period. The same numbers for Sweden are 16 per cent, 28 per cent, and 35 per cent. The only difference observed is that there was slightly more focus on economic issues in the second period in Sweden and slightly more in Iceland in the third period. The main difference between the countries is that a much higher proportion of Icelandic news reports relied on other themes (28–40%), compared with Sweden (less than 10%). Themes coded under “other” in Iceland include security, foreign affairs, unemployment, environmental issues, arts, and sports. In Sweden, the themes coded concern issues of trust, information and communication, and social issues that are not included in the health or economic frames.

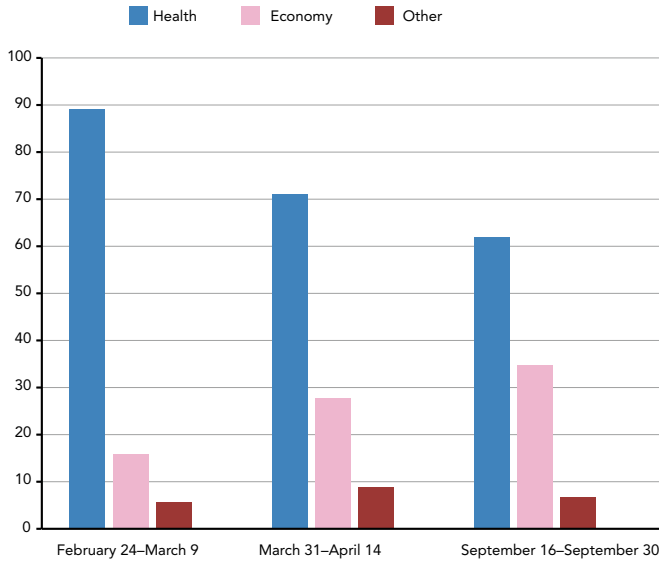
The difference we present between the two countries may be affected by a difference in coding, where the Swedish coding only included a main theme for each article, but the Icelandic coding allowed for multiple themes. These figures are therefore not directly comparable but give us insights into the focus of media discourse in the two countries, clearly showing the key importance of health, followed by the economy. In particular, this likely reduces the number of possible themes (and how frequently they were used) in Sweden, as it appears that the themes of health and economy are clearly the overarching themes in both contexts.

Figure 10.5 *Dominant themes in the Icelandic discourse, 2020 (per cent)*



Comments: Based on the coding, the Icelandic news reports could have multiple frames, whilst the Swedish coding only included one main frame for each news report.

Figure 10.6 Dominant themes in the Swedish discourse, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: Based on the coding, the Icelandic news reports could have multiple frames, whilst the Swedish coding only included one main frame for each news report.

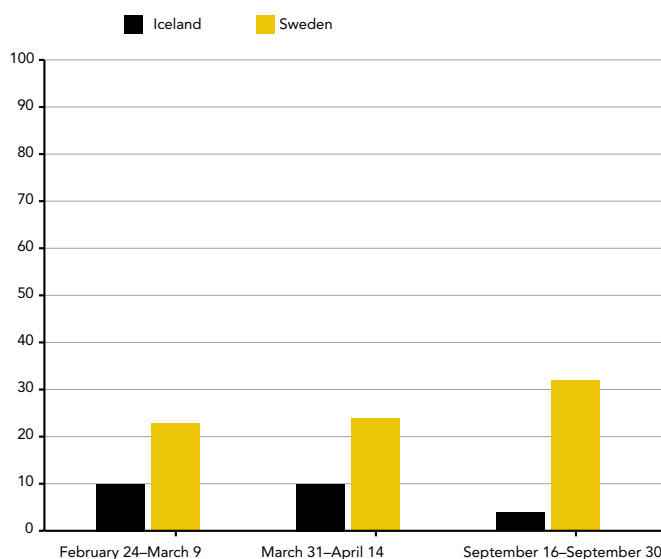
How critical was the discourse?

While the approaches taken by the two countries shared some similarities, the outcomes were drastically different, with more dire consequences in Sweden. Therefore, we might expect a more critical media discourse in Sweden – and that does in fact seem to be the case. This type of discourse is found in editorials, in detailed investigative reporting, or in news reports presenting critical or opposing voices. Figure 10.7 shows that only about 10 per cent of reports in Iceland presented any kind of criticism in the first two periods, dropping down to a mere 4 per cent in the third period. Conversely, about one-fourth of reports presented criticism in Sweden in the first two periods, with an increase to about one-third (32%) in the third period. Thus, we clearly see different trends in the two countries. Criticism decreased in the news reporting in Iceland between the first and the third periods, whilst it increased in Sweden.

The coding was somewhat different in the two countries: In Iceland, news stories were coded as critical if *any* criticism was present, while in Sweden, the coding represented a *specific* criticism of two of the main actors mentioned in the article. Of course, what was often criticised in Iceland were the actions and decisions of specific actors. The coding used suggests that the difference between the criticism in the two countries could be a conservative estimate, since the coding for the Icelandic reports was more open and encompassed any

type of criticism. If the same coding scheme had been used for both countries, the difference in criticism could therefore be even greater than what we found, further strengthening our conclusion that criticism was in fact more common in Sweden.

Figure 10.7 News reports that presented criticism, 2020 (per cent)



Comments: The notion of criticism was coded slightly differently in the two countries. In the Icelandic dataset, news reports were coded as critical if there was any criticism at all found in the reports. In the Swedish dataset, evaluations (criticism and praise/support) of the two most dominating actors mentioned in the news reports were coded. The figure shows the proportions of news reports where at least one mentioned actor was criticised, in each time period.

How international was the media coverage?

Table 10.2 presents the proportion of articles that focused on a specific country, both Iceland and Sweden themselves, but also key countries, most notably the other Nordic countries and the five most frequently mentioned countries in the news coverage in each country. As the Icelandic coding did not include coding of countries in the third period, we only evaluate this for the first two periods. Each news report could cover more than one country. The results show that both Icelandic and Swedish news coverage highlighted national issues, but that seems to be even more so in Iceland than in Sweden. Around 90 per cent of news reports in Iceland included Iceland in both periods, but only about 56 per cent of Swedish stories included Sweden in the first period, going up to 73 per cent in the second period.

Table 10.2 *Presence of selected countries, 2020 (per cent)*

	Iceland		Sweden	
	24 Feb–9 Mar	31 Mar–14 Apr	24 Feb–9 Mar	31 Mar–14 Apr
Iceland	88	92	0	0
Sweden	2	6	56	73
China	19	1	11	3
Denmark	3	8	2	1
Finland	1	5	1	1
France	–	–	4	1
Italy	28	1	23	2
Norway	2	1	2	1
Spain	14	1	–	–
UK	3	16	2	5
US	7	7	6	7

Comments: The table shows the Nordic countries as well as the five most frequently mentioned countries in Icelandic and Swedish news reports. In the Icelandic analysis, all countries mentioned in news reports were coded. In the Swedish analysis, the two most dominant countries were coded. Only two periods are included since the Icelandic coding scheme was updated in the autumn of 2020, and the research team stopped coding countries in news reports.

Media coverage in both countries mentioned other Nordic countries, but that was more common in Iceland, and the increase between the two periods is notable. Between 1 and 3 per cent of articles mentioned one of the other Nordic countries in the first period, but in the second period, the proportion reached 5 per cent for Finland, 6 per cent for Denmark, and 8 per cent for Sweden. Many of the news reports in the Icelandic media discussed harsh reactions in Denmark and how the Swedish approach seemed to differ from the approach taken by most countries. The proportions were lower in Sweden, and there was no notable increase between the two periods. Less than 3 per cent of news reports mentioned any of the other Nordic countries. What is noteworthy here is that it seems the international coverage in the Swedish media declined from the first period to the second.

Both countries covered Italy extensively in the first period, specifically, 28 per cent of news reports in Iceland and 23 per cent of reports in Sweden. This is not surprising, given that the first cases of Covid-19 in both countries came with tourists that had been skiing mostly in Italy or Austria, and Italy was the first European country to suffer severe consequences following the spread of Covid-19. Very few news stories focused on Italy in the second period. The same can be said for China: 19 per cent of Icelandic news reports mentioned China in the first period and 11 per cent in Sweden, but the proportion was

3 per cent or less in both countries in the second period. The prominence of China during the first period was related to coverage concerning the origins of the virus and the consequences of its spread. The coverage about the UK was more in Iceland, especially in the second period when 16 per cent of news reports mentioned the UK, but a comparable number for Sweden is 5 per cent. In both countries, 7 per cent of reports mentioned the US in both periods.

Conclusion

One of the clear similarities we found regarding Sweden and Iceland concerns the fact that the news value of Covid-19 peaked slightly *before* the number of infections (in Iceland) and number of deaths (in Sweden) during the first wave. This is not surprising, given the level of uncertainty when infections and deaths were still on the rise, particularly during the first wave of the pandemic. Little was known about the virus and the disease at the start, and images from China and Italy – heavily reported in both Iceland and Sweden – contributed to the alarming uncertainty. Subsequently, we saw the volume of news reports decrease once the initial wave subsided. The massive focus on Covid-19 in news reports during the uncertain period when the first wave was still on the rise was most certainly a contributing factor to the public perceiving the pandemic as being dangerous, altering their behaviour accordingly, and being more accepting of recommendations from authorities. With declining infection and death rates during mid and late 2020, the news value likewise decreased, although the pandemic remained a recurring item on the news agenda in both countries. As the relatively small second wave that led into the third wave gained traction towards the end of 2020, the pandemic received increased attention in Icelandic news, while it remained at a constant level in the Swedish media. Here, it seems that the pandemic was normalised in Sweden and thus lost news value, which suggests that even dramatic events may become part of everyday life over time.

We show that the health theme was dominant in news reports during the first wave. In Iceland, much emphasis was placed on solidarity and getting the whole population to participate in the fight against Covid-19. This was discussed with the popular tag line: *Við erum öll almannavarnir* [Civil defence is in our hands]. People shared this on social media and encouraged others to wash their hands, abide by the 2-metre distance rule, and follow other guidelines and rules. Most of the news reporting in Iceland was, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, along these lines. Emphasis was placed on using the daily information briefings from “the trio” as source material in the news reports. A survey conducted in Iceland in June 2020 found that over 90 per cent of Icelanders had received information regarding Covid-19 from news reports and the daily information briefings (Ólafsson, 2021a). The focus in the

briefings was on presenting a coherent and unified message (the importance of “flattening the curve” and keeping infections down), with little space given to differing viewpoints. This can be linked to the cornerstone of crisis communication: It is important to explain clearly to the public what is at stake, the causes of the crisis, and what the public must do. This type of discourse was clearly present in news reports in Iceland during the first wave, which was evident in how the information briefings and the experts were given much space in the information dissemination, usually with little or no questioning or criticism of the viewpoints.

In Sweden, too, the focus was on the pandemic as a health issue in news reporting. After first downplaying the likelihood of a fierce virus spreading in Sweden, the Public Health Agency’s strategy was to control Covid-19 until herd immunity was achieved. The goal was to “flatten the curve” (a similar discourse to Iceland), that is, to keep infection rates down (and thereby the statistical curve of infection and death numbers) so as not to overload healthcare resources. Support from the rest of society was almost universal, and in line with crisis communication practices. In his speech to the nation on 22 March 2020, the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, called on everyone to follow the authorities’ advice on keeping a 2-metre distance and to stay at home if infected. The political opposition kept a low profile in the matter, directing its rather lame criticism at the (poor) government’s financial support for businesses, but did not question the chosen strategy itself until after the first pandemic wave had subsided. Nor did the news media dedicate much attention to the different pandemic management and considerably lower death rates in the neighbouring Nordic countries, which may have put the Swedish strategy in perspective. Rather, focus was directed at countries that were worse off than Sweden. “Keep up, keep your distance” became an often-used slogan, that summarised the most important content of the Swedish strategy. In this spirit of national consensus, the Swedish news media was unable – or did not want – to present or make room for dissenting opinions. In fact, the few voices that questioned the Public Health Agency’s approach to the pandemic were themselves questioned and almost ridiculed in the public debate (Bjurwald et al., 2021). The media reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic’s first dramatic months followed the line of the authorities and the government. In this respect, the news media contributed to the authorities’ successful crisis communication, which was later indirectly confirmed by the Public Health Agency’s press manager, Christer Janson, in his tribute to the media’s support (Dagens Media, 2021).

To conclude, our analysis shows certain similarities between the Icelandic and Swedish news reporting of Covid-19 during the pandemic. It indicates that the media in both countries was more informative than investigative. There was much emphasis placed on supporting authorities’ strategies, and little room was given to outside voices and criticism. There was much focus on domestic cover-

age, and the discourse focused heavily on echoing health-related information from authorities. Both Iceland and Sweden chose milder strategies to contain the pandemic, but the results were drastically different. Whilst Iceland's strategy has been regarded as a success when compared with many other countries, the number of deaths in Sweden have been much higher than in most places. This raises important questions concerning the role of media during a crisis. To what extent should the news media assist authorities in presenting a clear and unified message during times of uncertainty, and where does the democratic watchdog role of the media fit in here? Moving forward, we would encourage researchers examining Covid-19-related news reporting to work closely together in systematically analysing the coverage. The comparison between Iceland and Sweden here is based on datasets using different types of coding schemes. This leads to limitations in comparing the data but still provides us with some insights into similarities and differences between how the Covid-19 pandemic was covered in the two countries. The results also lead to new questions about which factors, both inside and outside media organisations, have implications on how they fulfil their democratic roles.

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