

Conclusions

In search of a Nordic model of crisis communication

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Abstract

This concluding chapter summarises findings of the various contributions and points to new directions of research for the future. In the first part, we address the results from each of the book's three empirically based sections: section II) politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators; section III) media and crisis communication; and section IV) citizens and crisis communication. Furthermore, we discuss the relevance of a Nordic crisis management model based on these findings.

Keywords: the Nordic model, crisis communication, public authorities, media, audience

The Nordic model, crisis communication, and Covid-19

In this book, we have endeavoured to investigate similarities and differences in the unique communication and information environment that the Covid-19 pandemic created in the Nordic countries. In this final chapter, we summarise the book's findings, as well as point to new avenues of research. We first address the results in each of the book's three empirically based sections: section II)

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politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators, section III) media and crisis communication, and section IV) citizens and crisis communication. Based on the findings of the three empirically based sections, we return to section I of the book and discuss the relevance of a Nordic model of crisis management. Much like the discussions concerning a Nordic model in general (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Hilson, 2008; Skogerbø et al., 2021), a lingering question is whether such a thing exists.

Politicians, public authorities, and the corporate sector as crisis managers and communicators

The seven chapters included in section II focus on communication from politicians, public health authorities, as well as lobbyists and industry actors. As illustrated in the introductory chapter, there is a wealth of literature on such aspects, particularly regarding politicians and public health authorities (Claeson & Hanson, 2021; Ihlen, Just, et al., 2022; Lilleker et al., 2021; Ratcliff et al., 2022). To a lesser extent, attention has been directed at lobbyists (Crepaz et al., 2022) and corporate actors (Guo & Cannella, 2021; Tench et al., 2022).

We first look at political actors, which are the focus of Chapter 3, parts of Chapter 4, and Chapter 5. In Chapter 3, Lars Nord and Eva-Karin Olsson Gardell inform us that while both the Norwegian and the Danish prime ministers used strong rhetoric to emphasise the gravity of the Covid-19 situation, the Swedish prime minister chose less harsh rhetoric. Despite these differences, Nord and Olsson Gardell still find that government communications in the Scandinavian countries displayed distinctive common features in their communication of the crisis, such as the need for national consolidation and exceptional political measures, in order to handle the situation effectively.

The focus on prime ministers continues in parts of Chapter 4 – by Joel Rasmussen, Øyvind Ihlen, and Jens E. Kjeldsen – with emphasis on prime ministers and their press conferences in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Here, one take-away also underscores the differences between the countries. Rasmussen, Ihlen, and Kjeldsen highlight that in the Swedish case, the prime minister and the political authorities almost seem to have left the reins of the country to the health experts, while in contrast, the Danish prime minister and the government clearly came forward as the decision-makers. The Norwegian practice could be located more towards the middle of this continuum between the health experts on the one side, and the politicians on the other (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020; Ihlen, Johansson, et al., 2022). In Finland, the government pronounced that their decisions were based on expert knowledge and scientific research, however, the legitimisation of policies still relied on “what is not yet known” (Parviainen et al., 2021: 241). One way to interpret this difference

is to connect to the distinction Siv Sandberg presents in Chapter 2, where she distinguishes between a West Nordic and East Nordic administrative tradition. The West Nordic model, typical for Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, builds on the idea of undivided power, where the dualistic East Nordic model restricts the influence of the government by granting administrative authorities considerable autonomy. This could explain differences found between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. However, what complicates this interpretation is taking Finland and Iceland into consideration. Political scientists have shown how “Denmark and Finland had politics-led pandemic management, which made use of more invasive regulatory instruments, while Iceland and Sweden employed expert-led pandemic management” (Christensen et al., 2022: 16). This obviously also pulls in another direction than what the postulate about a common Nordic crisis communication model would suggest.

In parts of Chapter 7 – by Jenny Lindholm, Tom Carlson, Frederike Albrecht, and Helena Hermansson – the focus on prime ministers continues, this time with a focus on their social media activity. Whereas Chapter 3 highlights the strong rhetoric of the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, Chapter 7 shows how Frederiksen primarily used her social media to communicate gratitude to the public and groups for various efforts and recognising the citizens’ hardships of coping with the crisis by expressing empathy and making her, according to the analysis, a supportive and compassionate leader. Frederiksen’s performance on social media is contrasted with the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, and it is noticed that he, in his social media activities, typically provided instructive messages, appealed for solidarity, and aimed at boosting the morale of the citizens. According to Lindholm and colleagues’ analysis, this gives the impression of a paternalistic leader talking *to* – not *with* – the people during the crisis. In addition to these differences, the social media analysis also finds several similarities between the prime ministers, mainly that across their communication, they had a common focus on the core actors of the Covid-19 crisis management: the government, governmental organisations, and health-related agencies.

Turning from political actors to the public health authorities, parts of Chapters 4–7 all address various aspects of their communication. A significant part of Chapter 4 focuses on the role and rhetoric of the health authorities in the Scandinavian countries, where Rasmussen, Ihlen, and Kjeldsen identify differences between the countries’ Covid-19 communications concerning themes of the danger of viral spread and how to define and manage risks to public health. Thus, they find that the Swedish government places the responsibility for infection-related decisions on the Public Health Agency of Sweden. The Danish and Norwegian governments, however, do not place the responsibility for infection-control decisions on a single authority, but can instead be said to engage in crisis management regarding the viral spread of the virus and

communicating a belief that the rest of society is robust enough to handle the implemented measures. Another difference between the countries is how the choices regarding the collective measures are justified. In this respect, the director general of the Public Health Agency of Sweden drew on a history of successful, voluntary vaccination programmes, advocating voluntary measures over collective restrictions. In comparison to this, the Norwegian communication strategy was most different. As opposed to justifying strategic choices with the help of everyday vaccination programmes, the Norwegian government justified extensive measures by drawing on a history of joint efforts in times of severe crisis, from World War II to the 2011 massacre on Utøya.

Continuing the focus on press conferences, Chapter 5, by Jens E. Kjeldsen, presents a rhetorical analysis that first and foremost highlights the introduction of a new type of press conference – the justifying press conference – whose purpose is to establish a rhetoric of urgency, which constitutes the spokespersons as legitimate leaders and endows them with authority. In this, there are clear similarities between the countries in focus (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden). The prime minister set the stage, and the minister of health informed about the situation and the measures taken. Then, in declining order of importance, the remaining representatives informed about the situation in their area of responsibility. In all three countries, the political authorities presented first, then the health authorities, and finally, in Denmark and Sweden, the police authorities.

Moving from press conferences to social media, parts of Chapter 7 also focus on how the health authorities perform on these platforms. One take-away from Lindholm and colleagues' analysis is that the Nordic health authorities show several interesting similarities in their communication on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic's first wave. All four health authorities interacted with other government agencies on Twitter. This low level of interaction with political officials may reflect the Nordic health authorities' need to not politicise their own communication by intertwining it with politicians' messages, and instead to manifest their role as professional civil servants. Lindholm and colleagues also find that the health authorities in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden frequently worked to provide their citizenries with instructions via Twitter. This focus on instructions by the Nordic health authorities during the first wave of the pandemic, argues Lindholm and colleagues, implies that they recognised the need for guidance among the public and specified appropriate actions to be taken or behavioural guidelines to be followed. Thus, the authors conclude that the public health authorities took a strong role as the government agency with the appropriate expertise to provide the public with guidelines.

Press conferences and social media are, however, not the only ways of communicating with the public. Indeed, more "classic" public information campaigns were also at the centre of the communication that the health authorities made use of during the Covid-19 pandemic. These campaigns are the focus of

Chapter 6, by Pernille Almlund, Jens E. Kjeldsen, and Ragnhild Mølster, where the authors conclude that the aim of the different campaigns was to indirectly regulate the population. Thus, the campaigns in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden made appeals to solidarity. The Norwegian campaigns achieved this through the Norwegian cultural concept of “dugnad”, while the Swedish campaigns focused explicitly on duty and how “we can come through this together”. In contrast, the Danish campaigns were somewhat different, as they only expressed solidarity through the explicit and often repeated sentence, “protect yourself and others by this good advice”. However, this sentence seems to be a clear reflection of the civic mindedness that was often mentioned by the Danish prime minister. Almlund, Kjeldsen, and Mølster’s analysis also highlights how the campaigns expressed the crisis management strategies in each country. In Sweden, the informational strategy represented in the campaigns primarily focused on facts and instructions on how to act, although part of the campaigns also used emotional appeals and humour to motivate citizens to continue their good habits. For example, the head of the Danish health authorities appeared in a humorous way as the strict authority in the videos. While there was little humour in the Norwegian strategy, it was also less authoritative than the Danish strategy. Accordingly, it left more space for the informational parts in a less instructive tone.

A final focus in section II concerns other import actors, such as unions or lobbyists. Thus, in Chapter 8 – by Finn Frandsen and Winni Johansen – the focus is on the industry level, and it is concluded that the Covid-19 crisis made visible the dynamics and interdependencies between the public sector, political level, and corporate crisis management. Highlighting the role of trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Frandsen and Johansen show that trade associations played a new role in acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, they did not only fulfil their traditional role but were highly visible in the media and to the public, and they were able to make themselves heard at the political level. They were also considered highly valuable actors and sources of information by journalists, politicians, and civil servants, as well as by their own members. In sum, trade organisations became central voices during the pandemic, and they communicated a lot compared with normal times, both internally and externally, and they even did campaigns to gain the attention of the public and show commitment to their members.

Looking at an equally influential group of actors, lobbyists, Wiebke Marie Junk shows, in Chapter 9, that based on a large survey of over 500 interest organisations in Sweden and Denmark, there is strong evidence to suggest that a higher level of affectedness by the crisis had a significant positive effect on the frequency of access to all lobbying arenas in both Denmark and Sweden. In this sense, Junk argues, the lobbying access in these two Nordic countries

during the pandemic can be seen as an instance of exchanges between interest organisations and different political gatekeepers that are adaptive to the changed circumstances during the crisis. Another take-away from Chapter 9 is that there is some evidence that organisations with higher staff resources enjoyed higher access during the pandemic. There is also limited evidence that some types of organisations enjoyed higher access than others. Thus, both Danish labour and professional organisations, as well as business organisations and firms, enjoyed higher access to the Danish bureaucracy after the outbreak of Covid-19 than did nongovernmental organisations.

Media and crisis communication

In section III, Chapters 10 and 12 both offer a focus on the news media and journalism role during the pandemic, while Chapter 11 focuses on disinformation and social media. While the latter has been the topic of much research and worry during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Larson, 2020), research in the former area is somewhat lacking, with some exceptions (e.g., Pollock & Vakoch, 2022; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Truedson, 2021).

The study in Chapter 10 – by Marina Ghersetti, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, and Sigrún Ólafsdóttir – is based on content analysis of news reports collected in Iceland and Sweden. The findings show that news 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. The findings also suggest that critical reporting on the implemented strategies and protective measures was limited, more so in Iceland than in Sweden.

The question of critical investigative reporting is also the focus of Chapter 12 – by Mark Blach-Ørsten, Anna Maria Jönsson, Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir, and Birgir Guðmundsson – which looks at the meta-journalistic discourse on investigative reporting during a public health crisis in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. Despite different methodological approaches, Chapter 12 and Chapter 10 present some similar conclusions. In neither Sweden nor Iceland is the question of critical investigative reporting much in focus – at least not until sometime into the development of the pandemic, when questions were raised as to the news media being too uncritical of government dissensions. However, in Denmark, the question of investigative reporting was in focus from the first day of the pandemic, with some news media highlighting the need to tone down that type of journalism during a health crisis, and other news media arguing the direct opposite – that in times of national crisis, critical, investigative reporting was more important than ever. The media users, like the news media, were also split. Some lamented uncritical reporting, while other users criticised news media for being too critical in a time when the nation should stand together.

In Chapter 11 – by Jannicke Fiskvik, Andrea Vik Bjarkø, and Tor Olav Grøtan – the focus moves from legacy news media to social media. Thus, the authors present a study of the Norwegian discourse on Facebook and Twitter related to the issue of Covid-19 vaccines and compare the findings with existing studies on social media and Covid-19 in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. The results show that the overall picture was that the Norwegian health authorities enjoyed a high level of trust from the population, and that the openness and transparency of the authorities' crisis communication may have been important factors behind this success. The study also focuses on the public's perceptions and responses to the Norwegian health authorities' handling of the crisis and the communication of public figures on social media. Here, the study shows that over time there was a shift in moods and arguments, going from scepticism to optimism, to disappointment and critique. Fiskvik, Bjarkø, and Grøtan thus reveal a pluralism of perceptions, where Facebook and Twitter users both support and contest information about Covid-19 vaccines. Another study has pointed to how enlisting supporters in both legacy media and social media might be an important strategy for the public health authorities (Kjeldsen et al., 2021).

Citizens and crisis communication

In section IV, containing Chapters 13, 14 and 15, we turn to the question of crisis communication and the roles of citizens. Chapter 13 looks at the issues of citizens in terms of trust, a topic that was propelled to the forefront early in the pandemic (Devine et al., 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Johansson et al., 2021; Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021). Chapter 14 looks at citizens' news use during the pandemic (Broersma & Swart, 2022; Pedersen & Burnett, 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Chapter 15 investigates how vulnerable language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden experienced communication from authorities during the first year of the pandemic, something that was also much discussed beyond the Nordic region (Maldonado et al., 2020; Viswanath et al., 2020).

Using public opinion data from academic surveys and commercial opinion polls, Bengt Johansson, Jacob Sohlberg, and Peter Esaiasson, in Chapter 13, present several take-aways: first, that crisis and the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect provide governments and state agencies with favourable conditions in which to conduct effective crisis management; second, that national differences in crisis-management strategies have little influence on the presence of a rally effect (Sweden, which adopted a highly criticised Covid-19 strategy and faced high death tolls during the first year of the pandemic encountered a rally effect in line with those of its neighbours); and third, that the scope of the rally effect was incredibly broad, with rising support levels (and eventual declines) extending to government agencies that played no role in the crisis management. Thus,

Johansson and colleagues argue that the rally-around-the-flag effect extends throughout the whole of society, with threats from the outside world triggering unifying symbols of familiarity and security, and that all state agencies, regardless of their specific roles, seem to function as such symbols.

The trust extended to government and government agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic were also extended to legacy news media. In Chapter 14, Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe examine news use and find an image of Nordic citizens who are well served by their news media, also in a pandemic crisis, and with a continued central role for legacy news media as part of this navigation. Ytre-Arne and Moe's quantitative analysis finds familiar patterns of news use carried on, and sometimes accentuated, in times of crisis: Nordic news users fear fake news, but they seem to experience misinformation in their information environment to a lesser extent than elsewhere. Local news remains important, including during the pandemic, but the extent and selection depend on the preexisting position of local media in each country.

The book's final topical chapter – by Klas Backholm and Camilla Nordberg – focuses on communicating the Covid-19 pandemic to vulnerable language minorities in the Nordic countries. The chapter finds that for language minorities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, mediated activities were the most common source of information, and that the information provided by authorities or mass media was considered relevant and trustworthy by the minority groups. However, their access to and use of public health information mirrored the socio-political position of the groups in general. Backholm and Nordberg also find that translated information in one's mother tongue provided broader access but did not resolve issues of cultural barriers to information. Other research seems to confirm this impression, with the degree of trust in the public health authorities varying between different groups as well (Madar et al., 2022).

A Nordic model of crisis communication?

Just ahead of the Covid-19 pandemic, the edited volume *Power, Communication, and Politics in the Nordic Countries* (Skogerbø et al., 2021) was published. In the final chapter, the resounding conclusion is that “it is hardly relevant to talk about a clear-cut Nordic model of political communication that highly contrasts other democratic states and their political communication systems” (Nord et al., 2021: 385). As should come across after reading this concluding chapter, the same could be stated for crisis communication. Still, as Nord and colleagues (2021) also conclude, there are some peculiarities that could be highlighted. The high levels of trust – both in relation to public authorities and legacy news media – might be particularly important, as it seems to contribute to resilience in the face of an adverse event like Covid-19. The argument that

the Nordic countries have had a particularly good starting point as being high-trust countries should be seen in relation to the existence of the Nordic model (Ihlen, Johansson, et al., 2022). Further, the low levels of polarisation and a strong sense of cooperation between institutions is also visible in the empirical chapters in this volume. This also contributes to a resilient society and can be interpreted as emanating from the Nordic model. Along this line were strong rally effects visible in all the Nordic countries, which can also be related to the low political polarisation of society and a consensus culture (Van Aelst, 2022). Thus, the high-trust society can be seen as a prerequisite for using pandemic rhetoric that emphasises personal responsibility and solidarity (dugnad, duty, and civic mindedness). Even if this might not be entirely unique for the Nordic countries, it fits well into the framework as being representatives of a state-oriented risk culture (Cornia et al., 2016).

Even while the Nordic countries share these features, as shown, their responses to an issue like Covid-19 vary. Political scientists point to the importance of “dissimilarities in governance arrangements and levels of politicization” related to managing Covid-19 (Christensen et al., 2022: 17), whereas we highlighted how earlier policy responses were more hierarchical in Denmark, Finland, and to some extent Norway, while more network-based governance was visible in Sweden and Iceland. Significant differences were also visible in the crisis communication, not least who functioned as “communicator-in-chief”. The prime ministers in Denmark, Finland, and Norway played a more central role in communicating the pandemic compared with their colleagues in Iceland and Sweden, where public health experts from responsible authorities played a more important role. We also found differences in the styles of communicating on social media from the prime ministers and the rhetoric from public authorities.

The crisis communication systems in the Nordic countries seems to have worked quite well, both in terms of informing the citizens of how to protect themselves and persuading them to take the vaccine. Dissemination of pandemic information, using broadcasted press conferences, legacy media, public campaigns, and other channels was effective, even if there are some questions regarding reaching out to vulnerable groups in society, such as individuals with migrant backgrounds. Returning to the CCC (Citizen Crisis Communication) model (Odén et al., 2016) presented in the introduction, the first function of crisis communication focuses on survival capabilities of crisis communication. Looking at the results in this volume, we are willing to claim that crisis communication in the Nordic countries strengthened citizens’ capability to protect themselves from Covid-19. The second function – the extent to which crisis communication strengthened the capability of holding those responsible accountable – might be more questionable. There has been a debate in the Nordic countries about deficits in accountability mechanisms, both in terms of governance but

also related to crisis communication, where the role of the news media has been questioned. Too much emphasis is said to have been devoted to disseminating information from authorities and not enough on scrutinising powerholders, exposing wrongdoings, or investigating consequences for disadvantaged parts of the population, including minority groups. The empirical analyses in this book seem to support this conclusion – at least in the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the third function, where crisis communication should strengthen citizens' social capabilities, the focus is on renewal and recovery. This perspective has been visible in some chapters, where speeches from the prime ministers seem to have filled this function, but also in social media use by the Danish prime minister, where she recognised citizens' hardships of coping with the crisis and thanked citizens and groups for their work. However, it is hard to determine whether this function has been sufficient.

Missing pieces and avenues for future research

An initial ambition of this book project was to provide research comparing *all* of the Nordic countries. We must admit that we only succeeded halfway with this goal, with, as frequently seems to be the case, a heavy emphasis on the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Hence, the Icelandic experience remains under-researched in many regards, not to mention that we lack perspectives from the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Åland, and Sápmi.

Most of the book has focused on the crisis management and communication of politicians and public health authorities, but here too more could be done, not least building on more comparative approaches including more countries and autonomous territories and regions. Furthermore, a question remains: How does the Nordic region compare with other regions or countries? While several of the chapters, including this concluding chapter, have alluded to differences, we would call for rigorous, empirical-based work to avoid leaning on the tradition of Nordic exceptionalism (Bengtsson et al., 2014). Some research has nonetheless contrasted the low levels of politicisation in the Nordic region with the situation in the US and elsewhere, and how this has led to support for Covid-19 vaccines in all but a few segments of the population (Wollebæk et al., 2022).

A host of different communicative challenges arise for public health authorities, and we do have some knowledge about how uncertainty was communicated (Kjeldsen et al., 2022), the role played by transparency (Ihlen, Just, et al., 2022), and how public health authorities attempted to strengthen their trustworthiness rhetorically (Offerdal et al., 2021). Still, here too more needs to be done in terms of exploring such communicative challenges more in depth, as well as adding a focus on other rhetorical aspects.

Additional research on particular actors during the Covid-19 pandemic is another possible focus. For instance, it would be worthwhile to have a stronger, empirical focus on the role played by nongovernmental organisations, not least among the minority population (Brekke, 2021). Additionally, case-oriented work could be conducted to get a better grasp of how certain business actors were lobbying to get exemptions from Covid-19 regulations (Raknes, 2023).

Finally, what also seems to be missing in the volume is a historical comparison. How did the public health authorities work this time around, compared with, for instance, what they did during the swine flu pandemic (Bjørkdahl & Carlsen, 2019)? Anecdotal evidence from interviews with communication officers in the Norwegian Institute of Public Health indicates how the negative effects of the swine flu vaccine was a lingering concern of the institute's employees.

All in all, however, we would like to maintain that the present volume has contributed valuable insights into how crisis communication works in the Nordic region. Insights that we believe are valuable to take into concern in preparing for the next pandemic or societal crisis of a certain magnitude.

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