

Jonas Ohlsson, **The Nordic Media Market 2015** (Nordic Media Trends 13), Gothenburg, Sweden: NORDICOM, 2015, 76 pp., \$31.90 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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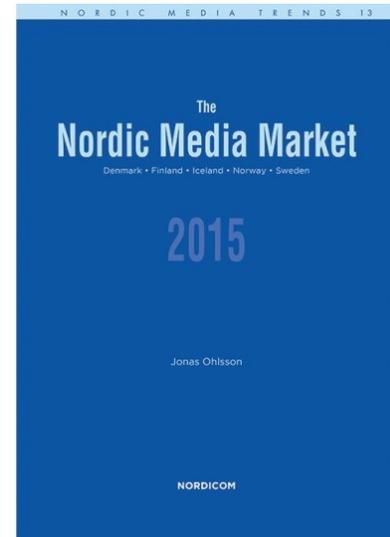
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The first objective of **The Nordic Media Market** report, intended for a broad audience of media scholars, is to present a descriptive analysis of the developments in the Nordic news media industries since the beginning of the 21st century. The analysis draws on detailed quantitative data gathered by the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research (NORDICOM), which published the report, as well as data presented in other reports, research projects, and databases.

At the same time, the publication aims to test whether the democratic corporatist media model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) still applies to the Nordic region. With this goal, the analysis contrasts the model's key elements with developments on the ground in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

The models proposed by Hallin and Mancini—the democratic corporatist media model, the polarized pluralist model, and the liberal model—are empirically constructed and describe the media markets in the Nordic countries; Greece, Spain and Portugal; and the U.S., Canada, Ireland, and the UK, respectively (see Figure 1). The comparative dimensions distinguishing the models are (1) the development of media markets and especially the strength and reach of the press, (2) political parallelism pointing to the connections between the media and the political parties, (3) the level of journalistic professionalism understood in terms of autonomy and self-regulation, and (4) the role of the state in relation to the media.

The democratic corporatist media model is based on the Nordic media market as it developed in the second half of the 20th century with a very high circulation of written press, a strong connection of the latter with political parties and other organized groups, and high levels of journalistic professionalism and institutionalized self-regulation, as well as a high level of state involvement in the media in the form of financial support to the press and a robust public broadcasting system.



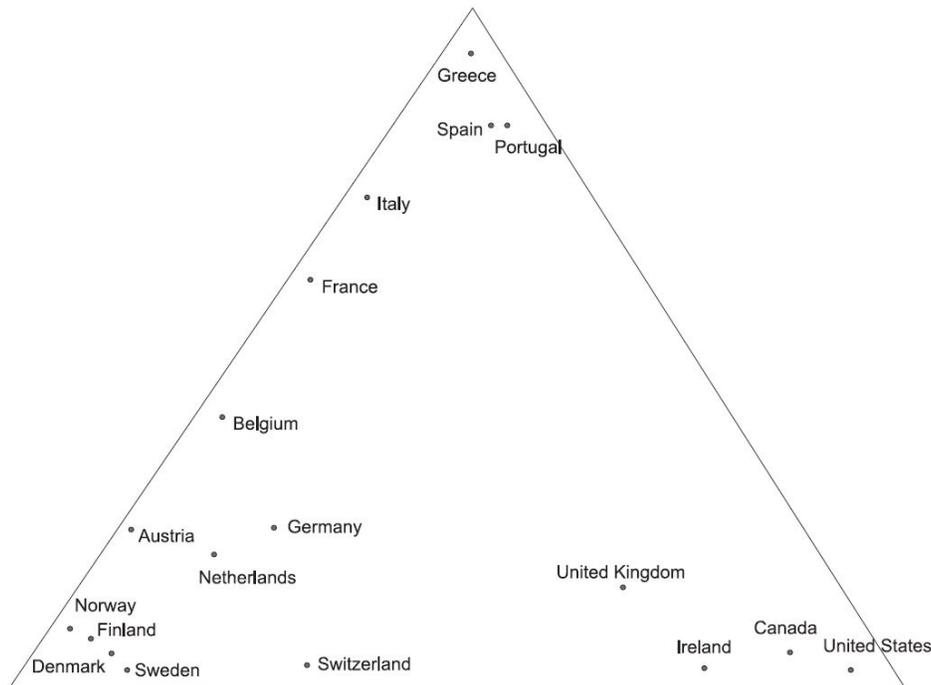


Figure 1. Relations of country cases to the three models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Comparing Media Systems by Hallin and Mancini (2004) is the analytical framework of the report, but it is not chosen because of its explanatory potential. To the contrary, Hallin and Mancini's premises are being examined and challenged here. Ohlsson's assumption is that the Nordic countries' media systems do not fit the democratic corporatist media model anymore as these systems have come closer to the liberal model. Consequently, the analysis is structured according to the dimensions that strongly distinguish these two models: the newspaper industry, political parallelism, and state intervention (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Nordic Model versus the Liberal Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Dimensions of comparison	The Nordic Model	The Liberal Model
Newspaper industry	High circulation	Moderate circulation
Political parallelism	From party press and external pluralism to more neutral and commercial press; regulations of broadcast media	Market-orientation of printed and broadcast media
Professionalization	High degree; institutional self-regulation	High degree; noninstitutional self-regulation
State intervention	Frequent; press subsidies and regulations	Less frequent; market-orientation

The dimension left out is “professionalization” because, as Ohlsson argues, both models share a high level of journalistic professionalism. However, according to the model proposed by Hallin and Mancini, the journalistic self-regulation in the corporatist model differs from the liberal model because it is “institutionalized.” Since there remains solid support for the established press councils in the Nordic countries, all of them independent, corporatist in structure, and making public decisions regarding media ethics (Nord, 2008), the report would have been enriched if this aspect had been included in the analysis.

The report shows how the distinct features of the Nordic model—distilled from the analysis by Hallin and Mancini of the other three dimensions—changed in recent years: Does the press remain strong, widespread, and characterized by political parallelism? Is there still an active state ensuring media pluralism and a strong public broadcasting service (PBS)? Ohlsson concludes negatively, arguing that the Nordic countries’ media systems have lost their distinctive characteristics. He also states that the differences between the five Nordic countries are too big to make them fit into one model. So, quoting a classic publication on the Nordic welfare systems, we would rather be in the presence of “a model with five exceptions” (Hilson, 2008, p. 113).

Is the “Nordic Media Model” Really Dead?

Ohlsson claims that the Nordic region is no longer characterized by a strong newspaper industry due to the decline in press circulation, readership, and advertising. But he also shows that the number of paid-for newspapers in the Nordic countries has remained stable and that falling newspapers sales has—to a certain extent—been compensated by increased online readership. Moreover, declining newspaper readership is a phenomenon present all across Western Europe and North America. Thus, the report’s main weakness lies in the lack of comparison between the Nordic region and the countries that serve as base for the other two models where, unlike in the Nordic region, there have been numerous newspaper shutdowns (Kamarck & Gabriele 2015). Furthermore, the report does not analyze the market for local newspapers separately which in Norway, for example, enjoy some of the highest readership levels in the world (Hatcher & Haavik, 2014).

Ohlsson also states that party parallelism of the press has become an extremely reduced phenomenon, pointing to a mere 3% of party ownership of newspapers in Sweden and an even lower percentage in the other Nordic countries. Hallin and Mancini, though, define “party parallelism” in broader terms as connections between the media and the world of politics. Indeed, the short part of the report that actually looks at the press links to trade unions and foundations with formal political objectives brings up highly relevant examples, especially from Sweden and Norway (p. 46). In any case, the report argues that ownership structures of the press differ so much between the Nordic countries that a single structural regional model has to be refuted.

When it comes to the active state and the strength of the PBSs, Ohlsson’s verdict is less categorical. While the report documents a significant decrease in the level of state intervention in commercial broadcasting (content-related obligations have been lifted and advertising regulations liberalized) and a gradual dismantling of state support to the press (confirming the findings of Ots, Krumsvik, Ala-Fossi, & Rendahl, 2014) and stresses that the PBSs have lost their monopoly position, it

also acknowledges the “surprisingly strong” position of the public media (p. 61). The report demonstrates that public television maintains the highest viewership rates and public radio enjoys an even more dominant position across the Nordic region. Also the online services of the PBSs have managed to establish themselves among the most popular websites in all five countries.¹

The author suggests that the outstandingly strong position of the Nordic PBSs is now the only feature that still clearly unites the region and should be considered “the critical factor” in any future comparative analyses of media systems. This suggestion is clearly one of the most interesting contributions of the publication.

As to the announcement that the corporatist media model is not valid for the Nordic countries anymore, Hallin and Mancini (2004) themselves had the hypothesis that this model would gradually move toward the liberal model. So Ohlsson, instead of proving them wrong, is actually proving them right. The evidence collected in the report confirms this displacement or convergence. Hence, instead of declaring the corporatist model obsolete, it would be more accurate to talk about a new hybrid model, a liberalized version of the corporatist model (Nord, 2008), with exceptionally strong PBSs and a weakened (but still existing) distinctive system of state press subsidies aimed at creating a diversity of opinions.²

A clear shortcoming of the publication, however, is that it fails to place the Nordic region in a comparative perspective that would shed light on common international tendencies. The liberalization that has affected the Nordic media markets has had an even deeper impact in other countries in the Western hemisphere, and it would have been most relevant to observe the actual “displacement” of other national markets toward the triangle’s angle of the liberal model and beyond.

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¹ For further reading on the Nordic PBSs, see Carlsson (2013) and Harrie (2013).

² Discontinued only in Finland.

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