Activist-journalism and the Norm of Objectivity: Role Performance in the Reporting of the #MeToo Movement in Denmark and Sweden

Jannie Møller Hartley & Tina Askanius

To cite this article: Jannie Møller Hartley & Tina Askanius (2020): Activist-journalism and the Norm of Objectivity: Role Performance in the Reporting of the #MeToo Movement in Denmark and Sweden, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2020.1805792

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1805792

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 12 Aug 2020.

Article views: 567

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Activist-journalism and the Norm of Objectivity: Role Performance in the Reporting of the #MeToo Movement in Denmark and Sweden

Jannie Møller Hartley and Tina Askanius

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark; Media and Communication Studies, School or Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article presents the results of a study examining the self-perceived roles of journalists covering the #MeToo movement in Denmark and Sweden. Drawing on qualitative interviews with journalists, editors and activists (N = 20) and participant observation at various #MeToo events, we examine the professional journalism cultures underpinning differences in the coverage and the broader public debate spurred by the movement in the two countries. The analysis is informed by the theoretical framework of role performance [Mellado, C. 2015. “Professional Roles in News Content: Six Dimensions of Journalistic Role Performance”. Journalism Studies. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.922276; Mellado, C., L. Hellmueller, and W. Donsbach. 2016. Journalistic Role Performance Concepts, Contexts, and Methods. Routledge] in combination with Tuchman's (1972. “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual”. American Journal of Sociology 77 (4): 660–679) seminal work on “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual”. This combined framework enables an analysis of how journalists negotiate ideals of objective reporting and activist imperatives when covering the movement and issues of gender (in)equality more broadly. Our study shows that journalists, to a varying degree, felt torn between ideals of impartiality and objectivity and ideals of active reporting oriented towards action and problem-solving but that these experiences differed between the two countries and between newsrooms. We discuss these findings in light of differences in the political climates around issues related to gender in the two countries and partially diverging normative ideals and professional journalistic cultures regarding the extent to which journalism and activism can and should be combined.

KEYWORDS
Journalistic norms and practices; journalistic roles; objectivity; activism; role theory; #MeToo

Introduction

While hashtag campaigns seeking to make visible sexual harassment, rape culture and misogyny are nothing new, the hashtag #MeToo, which inundated social media in the...
autumn of 2017, is one of the most recent and arguably the most high-profile examples. The hashtag campaign turned into a social movement with international resonance and follows a growing trend of public protest against sexism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression via feminist uptake of digital communication (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018). The #MeToo movement resonated in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity across the world. This was the case in neighbouring Scandinavian countries Sweden and Denmark for example in which media coverage and public debate took very different routes (Askanius and Møller Hartley 2019). On the issue of gender equality and feminist advances, Scandinavia is often perceived as a homogenous area geographically, politically, socially and culturally, and the so-called Scandinavian model of gender-equal welfare states has long been an established concept in international scholarship. Sweden and Denmark are often lumped together under headings such as “Scandinavian struggles for gender equality” (Liinason 2018b) “Nordic feminism” (Liinason 2018a; rebeck 1990) and “Nordic models of gender equality” (Melby, Carlsson, and Ravn 2009). While neighbouring countries with shared histories and intertwined labour markets, fairly similar languages and similar models of liberal social democracies and welfare systems, the two countries have “grown apart” in stark ways over the last two decades, not least when it comes to policy, political activism and public debate related to issues around gender equality and feminism (Birgersson 2015; Dahlerup 2004, 2011). These differences became apparent as the #MeToo movement gained massive traction as a news story in Scandinavia in the autumn of 2017, not only in terms of the extent to which the #MeToo movement was covered in news media across the two countries but also in terms of how the issue was framed. In Sweden, 3332 stories on #MeToo were produced by the four largest national newspapers in the first three months of the movement emerging on the international scene, and in Denmark, 594 items were published in that same period. In Sweden, the campaign became a rallying cry against sexism and sexual harassment, with petition campaigns and calls to action organised within a wide range of professions. The media industry was no exception, and in November 2017, thousands of female and non-binary journalists signed an open letter and organised around the hashtag #deadline, demanding an end to sexism in the Swedish news industry (for a detailed analysis of all petitions in Sweden, see Hansson et al. 2020; Pollack 2019). In Denmark, at least in the first months following the initial breach of the hashtag, media coverage was less intense and tended to de-legitimise #MeToo by framing the movement as a witch-hunt and an illegitimate kangaroo-court (see Askanius and Møller Hartley 2019). In Sweden on the other hand, the response was immediate and media coverage largely supportive, at times even celebratory. But what today is dubbed “#MeToo journalism” by critics has since been accused of violating press ethical standards and good journalistic practice, e.g., by publishing undocumented claims from anonymous sources and naming alleged perpetrators not yet convicted. In subsequent public debate, journalists and publishers have been heavily criticised for not adhering to objectivity standards and instead sliding into the position of allies and advocates for the #MeToo movement.

This article aims to shed further light on the broader context of these differences by exploring how journalists in the two countries experienced navigating different roles, ideals and normative positions in their profession while covering #MeToo.

The journalistic profession is known to be guided by a set of professional norms, such as press ethics and norms of objectivity (Tuchman 1972). These norms guide journalists in
their work and determine certain standards of conduct. The norms are often fluid, with room for negotiation. Journalists must, for example, negotiate between the ideal of having many and very qualified sources and the pressure to be first with the story (Møller Hartley 2011). As a spectacular media event, #MeToo is a case in which this normative navigation around a highly politicised and often divisive subject might stand out much more clearly than in the day-to-day workings of the newsroom. This is the case because, first, #MeToo exploded on social media as a global outpouring of personal testimonies of assault and harassment, and thus, the story came from the public rather than from the media. For example, some of the witness accounts in social media made unnamed accusations, challenging the ethical norms of not using anonymous sources in journalism. Second, being about harassment perpetrated by men against women and to a large extent directed at media and cultural industries, the #MeToo movement affected everyone, including journalists themselves, challenging the stance of objectivity or impartiality. This was particularly pronounced in Sweden where many journalists organised around the hashtag #deadline, lending support to female journalists who shared experiences of harassment or abuse by male colleagues and managers. Therefore, we investigate a case that illustrates how social media de-institutionalises news production, provides alternative channels of news circulation and, thus, challenges the roles of journalists who, in some cases, were taking on a more activist role, questioning the norm of objectivity and the rituals performed in the process of adhering to this norm e.g., by reporting on a movement in which they themselves were engaged and/or had stakes involved.

The objectivity norm has been strong in the press in Western democracies since the rise of the omnibus press, and studies have shown that many journalists in Denmark still regard objectivity as an important norm. In a study conducted by Skovsgaard et al. (2013, 32), 45 per cent of Danish journalists answered that it was “very important” to be as objective as possible in their work. In the Swedish context Wiik (2014) demonstrates, using survey data, how the norm of objectivity has become an increasingly important part of journalists’ professional identity as a critical watchdog “objectively mediating information” in the past 30 years (663). Such studies are often carried out within the theoretical framework of role theory and deal with varying role perceptions among journalists. As such, they study the manner in which journalists evaluate different statements and the extent to which they believe they fill the functions of, for example being a watchdog, providing critical analysis, or of being impartial and objective. However, these studies tell us very little about specific practices involved, such as taking a side in a specific story, or how the objectivity norm might differ in relation to different subject areas, whether some areas are influenced more by the personal opinions of journalists and how journalists straddle these passive and more active roles in their profession. Furthermore, these studies are criticised for not taking into account the significant gap between ideals and the everyday practices and realities of journalists in the newsroom, a gap which has been conceptualised as the difference between role perception and role performance (Mellado 2015). Mellado argues that the study of role performance enables an analysis that captures the so-called backstage of news production. In this article, we use the context of the #MeToo movement and the reporting around the issue of sexual harassment as a concrete case to uncover and analyse how journalists navigate, negotiate and re-negotiate various, sometimes opposing, roles. More specifically, we focus on how the normative navigation in relation to #MeToo takes place at various levels of the
professional journalism cultures in the two countries and the roles that journalists adhered to in relation to the activist organising and protests mobilised around #MeToo.

In the first section of the article, we present the theoretical framework of role theory, in particular the concept of role performance (Mellado 2015) and Tuchman’s (1972) work on objectivity as a strategic ritual. We then develop an empirical framework aimed at capturing journalists’ experiences and reflections on covering #MeToo across different news outlets in the two countries. Specifically, we focus on role performance, not just as a question of the agency of the individual journalist but also as entwined in the broader newsroom culture, the field of journalism and the broader media cultures in the two countries, themselves informed by different historical trajectories of feminist movements and political struggles for gender equality. This informs three levels of analysis, which are presented in the remaining part of the article. Finally, we discuss the findings in light of the differences in the coverage between the two countries and the different ways in which the individual journalists navigated this coverage, drawing on different normative ideals regarding the extent to which journalism and activism can and should be combined.

**Theoretical Framework**

Several models have been developed to describe how journalists navigate the various and sometimes opposing norms and purposes of their day-to-day news work. One such model focuses on professional roles—one of the key topics in journalism research (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016, 3). Professional roles are also key to defining journalism as a profession. In this respect, journalistic roles are essential components of journalistic cultures. Until recently, the study of professional roles in journalism has been addressed mostly from the perspective of normative standards and journalistic ideals, while analyses through the lens of professional performance has remained in the background (Mellado 2019). Most studies of the professional roles of journalists have typically shown that journalists worldwide endorse professional roles and values that emphasise neutrality, objectivity and the scrutiny of official behaviour, holding those in power accountable (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Hanitzsch 2011; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2016). However, research on journalistic role performance has also found patterns of multi-layered hybridisation in journalistic cultures across and within advanced, transitional, and non-democratic countries (Mellado 2019). Thus it is important to qualitatively examine the subtle differences of how the professional roles are negotiated inside newsrooms in different national contexts, and #MeToo provides an excellent case study for such an analytical endeavour, as the hashtag “breached” simultaneously in most countries across the world.

We build our theoretical framework around Mellado’s work on role performance, a concept which aims to establish a connection between journalists’ beliefs about the role of journalism and the actual practices of news production (Mellado 2015). This conceptual framework connects the characteristics of professional roles that have been studied in comparative contexts with different journalistic discourses and reporting styles in news, considering the relationship between journalism and power, the extent to which the journalistic voice is present in a story, and the way journalism approaches the audience. We focus specifically on the tone of voice and power relations. *The tone of voice* deals with the active–passive stance of the journalists in their reporting. The passive stance has been associated in the literature with the neutral (Cohen 1963) and
disseminator (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986) roles, while the active stance has been linked to the participant (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Johnstone et al. 1976), advocate (Janowitz 1975) and missionary role ideals (Köcher 1986). From this perspective, the intervention dimension of role performance can be identified, dealing with concrete decisions and reporting styles regarding the presence or absence of the journalistic voice in the news product. The absence of the journalistic voice in news output refers to a kind of journalism that gives prevalence to distance between the journalist and facts (Tuchman 1972; Donsbach and Patterson 2004). Its more active counterpart is a journalist-centred role (Esser 2008), where news professionals have a voice in the story, and sometimes act as advocates for different groups in society. These two ways of reporting conform to a unidimensional structure, whereby a greater level of presence of journalistic voice implies higher levels of intervention, and vice versa. From the power relations perspective, two dimensions of role performance can be identified: the watchdog and the loyal facilitator. These dimensions are independent of each other, and the lesser presence of one does not mean the greater presence of the other. Watchdog journalism—also known as “muckraking”, investigative, adversarial or exposé reporting—seeks to hold the government, business and other public institutions accountable, serving as a “fourth estate” (Waisbord 2000).

In applying the operationalisation of Mellado’s dimensions of role performances, we connect critical perspectives on the professionalism of journalistic roles with theories of news production and the sociology of news. To further theorise how objectivity was performed and negotiated at the height of the #MeToo movement, we draw on the seminal work of Gaye Tuchman on the norm of objectivity in newsrooms. She argues that there are three factors involved in journalists’ definition of an “objective fact”: form, content and interorganisational relationships. Her work shows that in discussing content and interorganisational relationships, journalists can only invoke their news judgment; however, they can claim objectivity by citing the procedures followed, which exemplify the formal attributes of a news history or newspaper. For instance, journalists can suggest that sources are quoted instead of offering their own opinions. Furthermore, Tuchman (1972) suggests that objectivity may be seen as a strategic ritual that protects journalists from the risks of their trade, including criticism from sources and audiences. When examining journalists’ experiences of reporting on the #MeToo movement, this framework is useful when seeking to understand how journalists might conceive of the balance between bringing their own opinions forward vis-à-vis quoting others, weighing out the risks, both personal and those faced by the news organisation, and when analysing how the form or genre of journalism and the newsroom culture influence normative navigation. As #MeToo was covered in the debate, culture and news sections of Danish and Swedish newspapers, we adopt a methodological design that covers the wide range of voices present in the public debate, from opinion and news journalists to NGO actors and activists. We elaborate on this research design in the following section.

Methodology

The article draws on in-depth interviews with journalists, editors and activists in both countries as well as participant observations of a range of public events on the causes and effects of the #MeToo movement, including those marking its one-year anniversary. The combination of participant observations and interviews with journalists from a wide
range of news media and activists allowed us to go beyond the “media debate” and newsroom negotiations to capture the various experiences of participating in the broader public debate raised by #MeToo. Further, this combination of respondents allowed for the analysis of internal differences, not just between the countries but also between the various roles that journalists play in comparison to activists. These activists assume(d) a position of advocacy, promoting gender justice activism, and used the momentum generated by the campaign to shed light on the structural dimensions of sexism and gendered violence in the public debate around #MeToo. The primary data consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews (each between 40 and 90 min long), with 20 respondents distributed evenly between the two countries (2 men, 18 women). In this article, we build our analysis primarily around the interviews with journalists and editors, while the activist interviews and participant observation functioned as secondary empirical material in helping us understand the broader context of the coverage and the positions taken by different media organisations, NGOs and grassroots actors. The interviews were carried out between February 2018 and August 2019.

We are aware that newsroom observations during the autumn of 2017 would have been ideal to capture the initial reverberations of the hashtag. In the retrospective interviews (in which we asked respondents to reflect on the days and months of the autumn of 2017 and the subsequent developments), we captured reflections that would have been articulated differently had we interviewed the respondents in the midst of events, i.e., when the movement and the attention it received from the media peaked around November 2017. However, in this case study, we were specifically interested in the respondents’ reflections on #MeToo in terms of how the debate unfolded over time and its continued implications. We were less interested in immediate responses and the importance assigned to #MeToo as a news event when it was at the top of the agenda. The interviews were semi-structured, i.e., they all followed a detailed but flexible interview guide, structured around a range of pre-determined themes and open-ended questions. These include personal experiences and involvement, editorial assessments and sourcing practices, ethical challenges and framing strategies specific to #MeToo reporting. The guide was applied with some variation, depending on the position of the interviewee (editor or reporter, Denmark or Sweden, male or female), the extent to which they had been involved in the #MeToo debate and the nature of this involvement. Before each interview, we read articles written by the interviewee in order to be able to adapt our questions to their specific experience and expertise. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To protect the anonymity of our respondents, while ensuring the transparency of the analysis, the interviewees were named journalist/editor/activist, followed by the respondent number and the label SE/DK to indicate their nationality and/or country of employment. The sample is not representative of journalists in the two countries in general, nor do we claim to have captured in our material all the different professional roles that journalists might embrace. The sample is small but diverse, allowing us to go into great depth with the various themes identified in the data. Finally, the participant observations took place between February 2018 and November 2018 and involved various public events, debates and demonstrations related to #MeToo in this period. The empirical data from these observations serve as context to understanding the broader debate around #MeToo in the two countries. Thus, the merit of this research is not its representativeness or generalisability but its ability to capture up-close and complex subjectivities and negotiations around
how to navigate journalistic norms and ideals in relation to the coverage of this specific news story and the topic area more broadly.

**Analysis**

The following analysis is structured around three analytical sections reflecting the three levels (individual, organisation, society/culture) examined in relation to how journalists navigate their professional roles when reporting on the #MeToo movement, in particular Mellado’s dimensions of presence of the journalistic voice and power relations (Mellado 2015). First, we explore the experiences of individual journalists whose room for manoeuvre is often negotiated in relation to the genre and the platform for which they produce content. We then explore how these experiences relate to and are shaped by the broader newsroom and work cultures specific to the different media organisations they represent—in this case, the gendered newsroom. Finally, the analysis positions the journalists’ experiences of #MeToo and struggles to navigate their professional roles in the context of differences and similarities in the broader media cultures and political context of the two countries.

**I: The Journalistic Voice and the Activist Role Performance**

The objectivity norm, when translated into journalistic practice in the newsroom, was synonymous with “balanced reporting” and fairness to many of the respondents. The journalists from Denmark, for example, argued that it was important in cases where men were accused of harassment to hear the other side of the story, one of the factors mentioned in Mellado’s dimension “Journalistic voice” (Mellado 2015). In Tuchman’s terminology, objectivity in this way could be ritualised, by adding the men as sources to the story. This was often difficult because many of the #MeToo stories published online did not name specific men. However, on the level of mentioning men more generally, the journalists felt that they also had to get a statement from men and voice their concerns. The Danish respondents maintained that this was negotiated in the newsroom by referring to #MeToo as an extreme case, i.e., journalists used the sheer scale of #MeToo on social media to justify their lack of adherence to the conventional press-ethical standards of not naming accused/alleged perpetrators prior to them being charged with a crime. This entrenched objectivity norm dictating “balanced” reporting meant that a great deal of the coverage in Denmark framed #MeToo from the perspective of men and in defence of men, often referred to by the interviewees as a form of “both-sides ism”. This confers to one of the factors that Tuchman (1972) sees as part of the rituals of obtaining objectivity.

The respondents pointed out that these norms were subject to major challenges in the coverage of #MeToo because if journalists were to adhere to them, they would not have been able to cover #MeToo. As this journalist explained:

There is a breach in our system, which has meant that people are experiencing an injustice and are discriminated. And you can see that this has accumulated over the years, and suddenly the balloon burst. And we have had to find our ways journalistically because the rules were kind of changed somehow. Should we say that we could not cover these things because we would accuse an innocent person, or do we have to close our eyes to a blatant flaw in our
society? Our role is also to expose abuse of power, and this was clearly abuse of power, with absolutely no consequences. (Journalist, respondent 16, DK)

Conversely, in Sweden, the journalists saw the importance and scale of #MeToo, as a social movement, as more significant than adhering to journalistic norms and conventions. This prompted some journalists in Sweden to take a more active, and in some cases activist, role than their colleagues in Denmark. One journalist described this shift or pressure towards activism as follows:

It felt like there was a lot of pressure on journalists at the beginning of #MeToo. There was a sort of expectation on journalists to become activists. That is, to leave our impartial reporting behind and to instead start taking a stand for or against certain people. And I’m not saying I had any such pressure from anyone, because I didn’t, but I’m talking more about some kind of general feeling that: ‘This is a social movement, a feminist movement!’ I never felt like I myself wavered, but I think some did. I think it created something, in many journalists, that this is to keep your head cool or to be pulled because when it becomes such a massive movement that is basically so incredibly strong and positive, this collective, women come together, the culture of silence must be broken, so you may want to react with the heart and not with the brain. Then, as a journalist, you have to take a step back and remember what our job is. (Journalist, respondent 8, SE)

The data shows that journalists in the midst of the #MeToo movement felt torn between the ideals of impartiality and objectivity and an ideal type of active news reporting oriented towards action and problem-solving. The journalists were caught in between the two role performances of the watch-dog and what Mellado (2015) has called the “local facilitator” (602). This led to a heated debate around press ethics and whether Swedish media “went too far” in terms of naming and shaming accused perpetrators, a debate which is still ongoing and the legal procedures of which have only recently been settled. This debate and framing of #MeToo as an “kangaroo court” was present in Denmark from the very beginning of the most intense #MeToo period, a time when very few examples of harassment by named people had actually been published. As this respondent put it: “From the very get go, it was as if the actual #MeToo stories [in Denmark] were fewer than stories arguing that #MeToo was a witch hunt” (Journalist, respondent 3, SE/DK).

The data indicates that in both countries, journalists working with culture, or opinion journalism, took on a more active role in their writings, while news journalists were largely confined to the expectations of objective and impartial news reporting. Hence, the respondents positioned “journalism” in opposition to “opinion” and explained that #MeToo was covered in both genres; however, while it was essential in the documentation of the news stories, this was not necessary in the opinion and debate section. Among the Swedish respondents, there was a sort of self-criticism of the news reporting, suggesting that many news media went too far towards the deliberate active role as a loyal facilitator (Mellado 2015) acting in the service of #MeToo as a social movement. One respondent reflects openly on how she worked very carefully and consciously to avoid falling into the “activist trap” and to ensure her “journalistic voice” did not become too present:

To me personally, it was never a problem to separate the personal from the professional. I was never interested in joining #deadline. Maybe it would have been different if I wasn’t doing this investigative piece, I was extremely focused on my investigation being as serious and inviolable as possible and therefore it was important to me not to engage in anything which could
come across as activist. I didn’t even like things online related to #MeToo. I didn’t want anyone to be able to put a finger on anything, so I made sure to never mix those roles. (Journalist, respondent 20, SE)

To this editor-in-chief, there is a clear and non-negotiable line between opinion journalism and news journalism—a boundary which, according to her, was blurred during #MeToo:

It is dangerous when journalists become activists. Our job is to stand on the side, to watch and report. Then I have another task. I’m not just a journalist, I’m an opinion journalist. As an opinion journalist, I can take whatever position I want. And in this capacity, I could just as well put on my Pussy Bow blouse and run with the flock. (Editor, respondent 13, SE)

In this case, a journalist wearing this specific garment symbolised a shift towards activism, which was later frowned upon by some commentators and colleagues. The quote above further reflects how journalists are expected to navigate opposing roles and norms and the greater flexibility of opinion journalists in interpreting what objectivity entails. They do not need to ritualise objectivity in the same way, and they can “take sides” to a larger degree than what is possible in the context of news journalism.

At the level of the individual journalist, the more active and deliberative role came at a personal cost. In Denmark, journalists who covered #MeToo and spoke about it on their personal social media profiles experienced online attacks from (often male) readers, which eventually made them re-think and refrain from engaging with these issues journalistically. Having an opinion about anything gender-related and having written about this on a regular basis also meant that, over time, journalists became branded as “the one always covering gender”. Their role performance somehow sticks to them. This experience of being known for writing about certain issues in certain ways seems to have increased with the increasing demand for journalist to be active on social media platforms with distinct online personas, influencing the debate around certain stories or themes. Some of the Danish respondents found it difficult to play this token feminist role or to combine it with other roles or areas of expertise in their profession. As one respondent put it: “People don’t remember all the other things I do, but they only remember me as the feminist from [name of newspaper]” (Journalist, Denmark, respondent 2). However, after securing recognition as a voice in the debate around gender in Denmark, they soon wanted to relinquish this position because the personal price was too high:

I have to choose my battles, and they get fewer and fewer. And I participate less and less in debate programmes and TV stuff or comments on things, etc. because I don’t have time for it. Or it is not even that I do not have time for it, actually, because I could certainly find the time for it, but I do not have the energy. It’s too hard putting yourself out there and just be attacked from all sides. (Journalist, respondent 2, DK)

A common theme in the interviews with the journalists from Denmark in particular, was the personal price paid for engaging in the debate around #MeToo, which took an emotional toll on individual reporters. This makes the normative navigation in news reporting and public debate particularly difficult in Denmark, and the respondents indicated that often after careful consideration of the potential repercussions, they would refrain from engaging in the debate altogether. Indeed, taking an openly feminist position is known to take an emotional toll on journalists over time and even to stymie careers (see, e.g., North 2009). The journalists in Denmark shared the experience of a tough and
emotionally draining debate climate around #MeToo and gender issues, in general, with activists and other actors who publicly “put themselves out there” and engaged in this national debate:

It is a really tough debate to get yourself involved in, and it also often has consequences for your working life and for your social life (...) ‘I can’t put myself out there anymore, and it is, after all, not that I don’t feel it (the hatred); I do, and I hate it. But I mean I get both sad, scared, I lose my courage and my energy, I feel the backlash is too strong and that my work is too hard. (Journalist, respondent 4, DK)

II: Role Performances in the Gendered Newsroom and the Constraints of the News Format

Questions around the role that journalists perceive as the most appropriate in a given situation have primarily been addressed at the level of the individual. It became apparent in the interview data, however, that the performative role was also negotiated inside the newsroom and in relation to the social dynamics of this space. The data indicate that the position of the media organisation in the country and how it is seen by others (e.g., tabloid vs broadsheet) were central when, for example, the use of anonymous sources was negotiated. A respondent noted that as a more serious quality newspaper, they had greater freedom with regards to using anonymous sources in the coverage of #MeToo and accusations of harassment. A female reporter who, at the time, worked in the culture section of a tabloid newspaper in Sweden reflected on her reluctance to cover the movement because she felt that the issue was being framed in a tabloid format as “sex scandal” or a focus on detailed accounts of sexual violence against women’s bodies and capitalising on vulnerable women’s testimonies in ways she felt uncomfortable with:

There was a certain angle, specific to the commercial-tabloid format in the #MeToo reporting, which focused on scandals, sex, drugs and celebrities. To me, the issue of sexual assaults is very delicate and perhaps even a bit personal, which it is to most women, I think. That makes reporting on this really tricky and hard – to be contributing to this kind of tabloid newspaper ‘hunt’. I don’t want to be part of that. That was a feeling I had. I didn’t want to take part in this conflict-oriented battle between two different sides. To a certain extent, sexual assault is men’s favourite topic, and to me, it is problematic when a somewhat male-dominated newsroom, with a male editor-in-chief and a male editor, is chasing stories about sexual assault against women. I don’t consider this very progressive, although elements of this were progressive, for example, the story about ‘Kulturprofilen’ in Dagens Nyheter, which was written in a novel way which required a female gaze. (...) But in classical crime journalism, the focus is on the details around the actual physical assault. It is often men who write about violent sexual crime, and I feel a strong uneasiness around this. And I know that other women at [name of news paper] felt the same. (Journalist, respondent 11, SE)

These reflections illustrate how the media-specific frames used by a specific media organisation were often negotiated between the journalist and editor and how the respondents felt about the constraints of the news format, here described as an “unease”, forcing them to focus on the conflicting aspects and extremes of the story. The objectivity ritual becomes a constraint, as the story becomes more conflict-oriented than the journalist believes it should be. A Swedish/Danish journalist working as a Sweden-correspondent in a Danish newspaper explained that, while reporting on Sweden in Danish news, she
was constantly asked to find “extreme cases” of Swedish gender politics that had “gone too far”:

It is also difficult because you easily end up cementing a certain idea (of Sweden). I think it almost always becomes problematic when there is too much coverage of Sweden on Danish terms. And with #MeToo, it felt very much like: ‘Ohh the Swedes, now they are at it again’. During the elections, we, not me, but my colleagues, also made a story about feminism in Sweden. It was a story about a family that had to raise the boys to play with dolls (…) I wouldn’t say that story was very representative of an ordinary Swedish family, but it was representative of the Danish image of the hysterical Swedes. (Journalist, respondent 3, SE/DK)

When asked by her editors to tap into and reproduce a stereotypical idea of Sweden as an extreme “Other” in the area of gender politics, which she described as a longstanding and persistent frame when covering Sweden in Denmark, she complied reluctantly and with a growing fatigue. Thus, taking a more active role as a reporter also meant occasionally taking a stand against what is considered “a good story”, and in this sense, the reporter indirectly criticised the status quo in journalism, i.e., representing a certain idea of Sweden, or vice versa, to audiences.

The use of anonymous sources was more prevalent in Sweden in the coverage of #MeToo, which was often criticised by the Danish respondents and considered a problem from the perspective of press ethics. Nevertheless, other respondents argued that this was a small price to pay for bringing this issue onto the agenda and “helping women” who have been harassed. This suggests that, on one hand, the larger cause was deemed so important that it suspended the norm of objectivity and enabled journalists to move into more active, interventionist and deliberative roles. When this was not possible, there were ways of working around the role perceptions, i.e., by performing the ritual of objectivity (Tuchman 1972) in a certain way. For example, the journalists covering #MeToo could argue for more structural or policy changes—either explicit in opinion pieces or more implicit through the use of sources who would argue for such changes. Hence, by simply putting a story on the agenda and choosing a specific angle or means of finding certain stories or sources, the journalist can perform a more interventionist and deliberate role behind the scenes. This, in turn, assumes a more activist stand, insisting on raising the issue of harassment or discrimination of women as an important subject to cover. In this way, journalists work around what one respondent called, the “general scepticism towards activism in journalism”. He further noted that “there is this desperate hunt for something neutral or objective” (Journalist, Sweden respondent 6). Interestingly, it enables them to both perform the role of the watch dog and the interventionist role at the same time.

The fact that journalists are required to make such an effort to prove relevance also indicates the inferior space occupied by gender and harassment as a subject. Some newsrooms are, according to the respondents, “male dominated”. This means that the primarily male editors would find stories on #MeToo less important than other issues, suggesting that more stories provoked comments akin to “haven’t we heard enough of that now”. Our data suggest that the gender of the editor matters as to whether and how gender issues were covered. Hence, the role you take as either a more passive reporter or the more deliberative active role when reporting on these issues is also defined by the gender dynamics around you. In other cases, the interests and hierarchical importance
of specific issues, i.e., that gender and feminism are seen as softer feminine issues, are often judged against more “important” subject areas, such as politics, which in turn are seen as “hard” and masculine subjects.

Interestingly, the journalists in Denmark noted that the Danish media industry did not use #MeToo as an opportunity to investigate allegations of sexual harassment within their own profession, whereas in Sweden, the media industry was scrutinised, with two of the first and most spectacular #MeToo cases revolving around an editor of Aftonbladet, Fredrik Virtanen, and a long-time television host at TV4, Martin Timell. The then editor-in-chief for culture at Aftonbladet described how she and the rest of the organisation struggled in their reporting on the #MeToo movement in the context of a colleague under active investigation, with the organisation being at the centre of public scrutiny:

It became so very difficult for us here at Aftonbladet because #MeToo was about or came to be about Aftonbladet and Fredrik Virtanen. So, it was really hard to tackle #MeToo as an ideological issue because that’s what it is really: Women demand not to be sexually harassed! I mean of course, I stand behind this. But there was no real room for me to discuss that principle because everything ended up being about Fredrik Virtanen. (Editor, respondent 13, SE)

This respondent’s reflections echo the difficulties of negotiating normative roles when the issue of sexual harassment also concerns the media industry and journalists themselves.

III: Power Relations in Diverging Media Cultures and Debates on Gender

Lastly, we found that journalists’ experiences of #MeToo reporting were contingent upon the broader media cultures and political contexts for addressing issues around gender inequality in the two national contexts. One respondent described the manner in which the composition, power balance and tone in the newsroom reflected the broader public conversation about gender and political culture in Denmark:

The newsroom is really just a reflection of society and the Danish debate. (...) The thing is there is no common understanding or recognition of the structural underpinnings of this issue here. It’s like: ‘If your boss groped you, why didn’t you just punch him?’ Well, I would like to have a job tomorrow, that’s why. The idea that the responsibility is with the women saturates everything here, I find. (Journalist, respondent 3, DK)

She noted that gender inequality was rarely addressed at the level of societal structures—owing to the predominance of a misguided but common assumption in Denmark that gender equality is a fait accompli—with colleagues in Sweden describing the Danish context as both “anti-feminist” and “post-feminist”. A Swedish reporter described the idea of gender equality as a “case closed” in Denmark:

I might be a bit unfair, but I feel that in Denmark, it is a lot like: ‘We are long done with solving the issue of gender inequality. They are the ones with the problem; the immigrant women’. (Journalist, respondent 1, SE)

The backlash is constant (laughs). It is like there is this hardcore group of men around the newsrooms of the country who believe the issue of continued gender inequality is bullshit and who do not want to hear another word about of it. That’s how we roll here … (Journalist respondent 2, DK)

In order to help us understand the differences in reporters’ experiences of covering the movement and the public debate on gender inequality it has generated, we may look
to the different political contexts of the two countries—both at the level of activism and grassroots politics and at the level of institutional politics. First, research suggests that Denmark and Sweden, despite their shared histories (e.g., the implementation of women’s rights during the emergence of the welfare state), have evolved very differently in the past decades. Feminist scholars have pointed to the heterogeneities, power relations and exclusions that characterise the Scandinavian region in questions of gender politics today (Dahl, Liljeström, and Manns 2016). Examining these heterogeneities, Dahlerup (2011) argues that whereas the issue of gender equality has been gradually politicised in Sweden and filtered into institutions and mainstream politics, the reverse process has taken place in Denmark, where the issue has been de-politicised and increasingly marginalised. Whereas a series of important events and actors in Sweden (such as the release of the widely debated official government report, Because the Power is Yours [Ty makten är din, Kvinnomaktsutredningen] (SOU 1998, 6) and the continued presence of influential feminist networks lobbying for electoral gender quotas) has shaped policy, political culture and public debate in the decades following the second-wave mobilisations of the late 1960s, Wängnerud (2000) points to the lack of similar epoch-making political events and actors in Denmark at the level of grassroots and institutional politics. For example, the Swedish activist network The Support Stockings [Stödstrumporna] successfully managed to keep gender on the political agenda and to maintain the visibility of gender issues in the media in the 1990s, a period largely characterised by political de-mobilisations and stagnation in Denmark. Since the 1990s, progress towards full gender equality has stagnated in Denmark. At the same time, feminism as a concept and label describing the struggle for equal rights for both sexes has largely disappeared from official political lingo in Denmark. In comparison, the majority of party leaders in Sweden declare themselves feminists (Dahlerup 2004, 2011). Overall, the general conservative and neoliberal turn in Denmark in the past decades has given prominence to the widespread idea that feminism has “gone too far” (Dahlerup 2018). Such ideological currents of recent years should be understood in relation to Denmark’s historical role as “the libertarian of the north”, where resistance to quotas and state interventionism in general have been pervasive (Bergqvist et al. 1999). We see these differences and diverging historical trajectories reflected in how the respondents experienced and described their engagement in the public debate on the issues of feminism and gender inequality today:

R: The Danes have a more open debate, but it is kind of warped, in that, there are things you will never say there because you never know how what you say will be received. It kind of gets to you. There are so any battles I don’t ever pick in Denmark; at dinner tables, in the workplace or actually in any kind of everyday setting. You have to be really careful not to reveal you’re a feminist. You’re laughed at, ridiculed, or taunted.

I: Has it always been like this?

R: It has become a bit better in some ways. Before, you know, it was just a HAHAHA. People would actually bully you. They are now starting to look towards the rest of the world, although reluctantly. (Journalist, respondent 9, DK/SE)

The respondents from Sweden described how reporting on #MeToo and addressing the underlying issues of power and inequality at the heart of the global outcry was essentially
a feeling of engagement in an ongoing conversation and of being part of a larger community:

#MeToo became so big here because it tapped into an already existing conversation; because there is such widespread awareness and insights around these issues here (...). After all, there are a lot of female journalists and feminists who are exposed to hatred and threats in Sweden, but you still feel like you are part of a relatively big community in Sweden. You can go out and say something and be a feminist in public and actually get a lot of positive feedback. (Journalist, respondent 1, SE)

Another respondent describes the dark side of the community that formed around #MeToo in Sweden:

There were these months during which it was difficult to say anything remotely negative about #MeToo and this became part of this sense of a state of emergency or exceptionality and the dark side of #MeToo-journalism. People became speed blind and took shortcuts. This thing about everybody first running in one direction and then all of a sudden, the tides change, and everybody runs in the opposite direction, is very Swedish. The two currents never happen at the same time, which means there is never an ongoing argument back and forth. I think Denmark is better at having a brawl. (Journalist, respondent 20, SE)

Journalists in Denmark describe this “brawl” in more negative terms, however. According to them #MeToo tapped into a generally hostile and toxic environment for both activism and reporting on all issues related to gender and gender equality. As #MeToo immediately became part of this broader conversation, both the ensuing public debate and media coverage were saturated by a critical frame, informed by post-feminist ideas of the movement as unnecessary/redundant or presenting it as a witch hunt against men and a social media-driven kangaroo court that had “gone too far”:

It was like trying to get a debate going and then [bangs the table] it was shut down again completely. That was pretty surprising, or maybe I wasn’t surprised because I know Denmark. But still, we never even got started; it just never happened because no one dared. (Journalist, respondent 8, DK/SE)

This toxic environment affects whether and how journalists write about issues related to gender equality. As one journalist described, it means that such issues receive less coverage: “it is not so much that it is a blind spot as much as it is reluctance to even cover these issues journalistically” (Journalist, Denmark, respondent 16). This meant that, in Denmark, you were part of the majority, a larger community, if as a journalist you were sceptical or critical towards #MeToo. Several respondents felt that the environment was harsh in Denmark, with one of them describing that female journalists were constantly making sure that they did not come across as “a woman with a cause” in their work (Journalist, respondent 16, DK). In Sweden, the opposite was the case. Those who raised critical questions around press ethics, the rule of law and lack of due process in many of the stories published in the first month of the movement were in the minority and were left feeling isolated or stigmatised. For example, the respondent below described how she felt alone “in all of Sweden” as she openly opposed the mentioning of specific men who had not yet been charged when criticising the way in which #MeToo was covered by many of her colleagues:
So, it was almost as if I felt ashamed (sigh) … occasionally … and I guess I still do today. The feeling of shame. That I did not become part of that community. A community which I, with my feminist beliefs and socialist view of the world, actually do embody. I am for all women and men’s equal rights; there is like no question about it. But I did not become part of that movement. And for that, I can almost feel ashamed. That I had to … that I really had stuck out my neck in the way I did, that I wrote what I did. That I did not become one of ‘all women’. (Editor, respondent 13, SE)

Thus, a key difference in the respondents’ experiences of participating in the debate concerned when, how and what it meant to feel part of a larger (national) community or to deviate from consensus in that community in Denmark and Sweden. Furthermore, the personal price paid by journalists for engaging with the subject seemed higher for Danish journalists, who were acting in a minority environment, one which tends to reinforce the role of the objective, passive reporter. Conversely, in Sweden, the generally supportive and celebratory attitude towards the movement in newsrooms and the broader public opened up possibilities to engage in the subject matter in a more active and deliberative manner. It also meant, however, that raising concerns of breaches of press codes and ethics and the blurring of boundaries between opinion and news and activism and journalism entailed being stigmatised and a sense of being excluded from the larger community.

**Concluding Discussion**

In the Nordic context, discussions on how professional norms are negotiated inside media organisations, as well as which societal issues to cover and how, should be understood in relation to a notion of responsibility distinct to publicists, which in a Nordic context is understood as a form of privat media with a public service mission. This norm of a responsibility towards the general public is strong in both countries, across both commercial media and public service. Interestingly, however, in the case of #MeToo, this responsibility was used both as an argument for more coverage and a more deliberative role for reporters and as an argument against covering the movement, usually in discussions about press ethics, the use of anonymous sources, social media as “news agency” and practices of naming versus anonymising. The fact that the #MeToo movement was born, mobilised and developed on social media also put the newsroom under a new kind of pressure. News organisations felt the pressure to “keep up with” social media and to be the first to “break” a story. At a time when social media and the international news media were naming accused perpetrators of sexual harassment or misconduct, the question remained as to why the national media should refrain, making the loyal facilitator role easier, at least for some media organisations. The case of “Kulturprofilen” in Sweden spurred renewed debate concerning how to define a public personality and raised questions such as what qualifies as “people in power” and what qualifies as journalism in the service and interest of the general public. From our analysis, we can see how the conventional truths on these issues were, to some extent, destabilised and re-negotiated during this period.

During the interview process, it also became clear that some cases were put on ice because of difficulties getting women to come forward publicly with their accusations. This shows that the norms of transparent and “balanced” reporting were quite strong,
and one could argue that this was what made the #MeToo coverage in traditional media outlets different from that on social media.

The absence of rules of ethics and norms of objectivity amongst ordinary users or celebrities on social media platforms might then have reinforced the watchdog and interventionist role of the established media. This was the case more so in Denmark than in Sweden, with criticism by NGOs and the activist community, which was hoping that the established news media would somehow emerge from the bushes, call for action and point towards solutions.

So, did journalists covering #MeToo become activists, as some have alleged in the aftermath of the autumn of 2017? Yes, to some extent, albeit with some consequences and a price to pay. This rich, in-depth material has shown that taking an active role and leaving behind the idea of representativity also meant stepping outside the familiar rituals of objectivity—in other words, sticking your chin out. This led individual journalists to retrospectively question whether it was worth it, engaging in national discussions of media organisations “going too far” and responding to accusations of journalists, as a profession, stepping out of line and into the ranks of activists.

We might understand #MeToo reporting in the context of broader developments in journalism towards new forms of “active journalism”, where reporters actively try to “help the political community act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems” (Rosen 1999 in Bro 2008, 312). In her discussion of journalism as activism, Vine (2017) addresses the need for new terminology to describe the kind of investigative journalism which might be practised within NGOs. She argues that advocacy journalism—with strict ethical guidelines produced from within or in collaboration with an NGO or a lobby organisation with an agenda—may better serve the public interest than fragmented mainstream journalism, which is compromised by less obvious biases (Vine 2017). In the Swedish context, similar arguments were expressed by some of the respondents. But we also saw that other journalists succeeded in taking an activist role behind the scene so the speak, while on the front stage maintaining the performance of ritualised objectivity.

Furthermore, we have shown that the more general debate culture indeed matters to these normative negotiations and the way in which journalists feels included or excluded in the professional community. Becoming an activist journalist and performing the role of the loyal facilitator to use Mellado’s terminology, is not simply a question of personally orientating oneself towards a different role; it is also a question of the role of mainstream news media in relation to broader and more structural changes. In the case of #MeToo, it is also about how sexual harassment and gendered violence is covered and how social change on these matters is forged or stymied by this reporting.

Notes

1. When addressing differences in media cultures across Denmark and Sweden, we dovetail on a transcultural aproach to studying media cultures, as proposed by Hepp and Couldry (2009) in their critique of “essentialist container thinking” in contemporary comparative media research. This entails an understanding of media cultures not as strictly bounded by a specific national territory, or as completely de-territorialised, but as a kind of specific, if often blurred, cultural “thickening of translocal processes of the articulation of meaning”. Rather than mining the data for that which is essentially Danish or Swedish cultural properties, such an approach
to media cultures tries to consider the specificity of such thickenings and the complex interrelations between them.

2. By the term activists, we refer to both civil society actors and people who work professionally and full time with gender issues as part of NGOs such as Dansk Kvindesamfund, Sex og Samfund, Efter #MeToo, Mangfold, Danner and Kvinfo.

3. In reference to “putting on the Pussy Bow blouse and running with the flock”, this journalist from a Swedish tabloid newspaper hints at the public outcry against the ousting of the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy Sara Danius. The Pussy Bow blouse, often worn by Danius, including on the day of her resignation, became a symbol of protest in Sweden and a nation-wide way of showing support for Danius, who many considered to have been unjustly “sacriﬁced” by (male) members of the academy. In the weeks following the scandal in the Swedish Academy, which came to be intrinsically linked to #MeToo, news anchors, prominent journalists, politicians and celebrity activists alike posted pictures of themselves wearing Pussy Bows on social media, and some took to the streets as part of the protest events organised in Stockholm and other major cities.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conﬂict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References


