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Mikael Sjöberg: rebuilding trust in the
Public Employment Service

Editorial

Society's watchdog in danger?

News

OECD: Wage cuts will not create jobs

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Researchers: Employment has become
more important than job content

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Theme: Media in crisis - a challenge for democracy?



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Society's watchdog in danger?

When journalists and spin doctors swap jobs, should we worry? If professional advisors and communications workers have more influence than politicians, is it a risk to democracy? When journalism becomes a victim to cuts, what happens to quality? And when there are two communicators for each journalist, what happens to society's watchdog?

EDITORIAL

12.09.2014

BY BERIT KVAM

In this issue The Nordic Labour Journal looks at a theme which not only affects us as professionals, but also as citizens. There is unease over a development which could weaken media's role as critical observers.

Media in the Nordic region and elsewhere are hit by falling revenues and electronic media is taking over from print. A radical change is taking place which could pose a threat to quality journalism. We know from previous research that change and jobs cuts influence work environments. A new report from the Norwegian Work Research Institute shows the work environment in editorial offices influences the quality of the journalism. If quality suffers, it could affect journalists' chance to perform their social role.

Swedish researchers led by Professor Stefan Svallfors are due to publish a study of policy professionals: professional advisors and communicators. Stefan Svallfors is himself surprised with the results after mapping the group using interviews of 70 people. In our story we learn that policy professionals are involved in policy making with a dodgy mandate. Some of them are skeptical to elected representatives, they know they have power and they can say: "yes, I have more power than an MP". At the same time communicators and advisors are experts who have become invaluable to nearly all organisations. Svallfors is worried about what this means for the media and warns against what has happened in Gothenburg, where the number of journalists has been halved and the number of communicators doubled in the past ten years, leaving two communicators in the municipality and in companies for each journalist at the city's largest newspaper.

We might be witnessing a convergence in the trade. The Finnish Union of Journalists is considering inviting communicators as members. In Denmark former spin doctors have returned to work in the media, which used to be considered impossible. This shows attitudes are changing even though some editors still consider such a switch to be dubious.

Dubious or not, what is important is whether the quality of the journalism is weakened, putting credibility at risk. In that case society's watchdog is in danger.



Statue outside VG newspaper.

Consumers move online but won't pay for content

What happens when the number of communicators keep growing while the number of journalists keeps falling and many media are bleeding? Will it affect democracy in the Nordic countries?

THEME

12.09.2014

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The relationship between journalists and communicators is a story of both symbiosis and aversion — journalists need communicators and the other way around. The need does not necessarily create trust. It is still considered bad form to go from one occupation to the other.

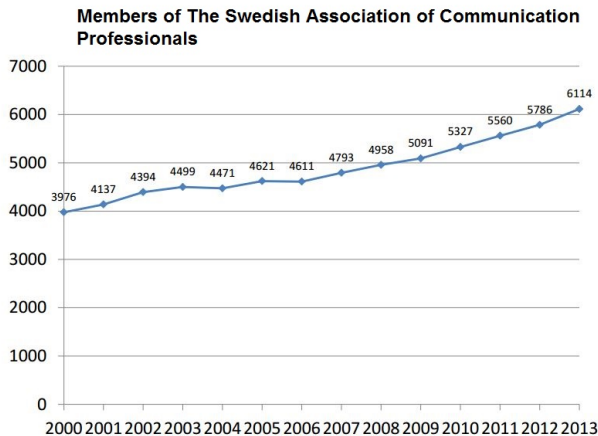
Since both journalists and communicators are good at expressing themselves, there is also a risk that grand talk about

investigative journalism and the need for openness will hide other interests closer to home — like keeping your job or being close to the corridors of power.

New media a challenge

The two occupations are linked and both are influenced by rapid technological developments, but there is no direct correlation. Just like social media undermine the big media's au-

thority, they also represent an opportunity for communicators. Authorities and businesses need more resources in order to handle the new channels.



If you look at organisations representing journalists versus those representing communicators in the Nordic countries, they have nearly 74,000 members between them; 58,600 are journalists and 15,400 are communicators.

But the numbers only illustrate part of reality, since many communicators are not members of existing unions. A few years back, Swedish communicators used a company dealing with business information to gather lists of all those calling themselves communicators.

“In that list you might also find people who sell mobile subscriptions at shopping centres who would not be members with us. But by our estimates there are 20,000 communicators in Sweden and 5,800 are members with us,” says Jeanette Agnerud, spokeswoman for the Swedish Association of Communication Professionals.

The technological development has seen a rapid shift from old to new media. Daily newspapers are building a model based on both advertising revenues and income from subscriptions or regular sales. When readers disappear it is difficult to compensate for the loss of income, since ads follow the audience. Increasing subscription cost or the cost of each paper risks losing even more customers.

More expensive daily newspapers

Yet daily newspapers have become much more expensive than other goods. While Sweden’s consumer price has risen by 2.71 since 1981, the price of evening papers has risen ten-fold. Dagens Nyheter, the largest daily, now costs six times more than in 1981.

All in all this means print media have become more than twice as expensive as other products. The TV license fee however has stayed level with other goods and services.

To understand what has happened to the media market you could compare it to a city where there was nothing but public transport. Commuters can move, but they cannot affect timetables or where the bus should go. The new media are personal cars which give a completely new flexibility. You can go where you want, when you want, but of course you have to help pay for the roads. According to a new study from Professor Ingela Wadbring at the Mid Sweden University, each Swedish household spends 13,000 Swedish kronor (€1,400) a year on media — including everything from daily newspapers to music and books.

That means a total annual consumption of around 60 billion kronor (€6.5bn), or two percent of GDP.

Little willingness to pay

In a longer perspective — 1981 compared to 2010 — two new factors have been added. In 1981 no household paid for broadband, mobile telephones or pay-TV. Households have mainly cut costs like journals and to a lesser extent daily newspapers and the TV license fee.

“The main issue for many traditional media houses is that consumers are moving online, without being willing to pay for their consumption there,” says Ingela Wadbring, Head of Research and Professor of Media Development at the Mid Sweden University. Interestingly, consumers are willing to pay in order not to have advertising:

“If you ask what they are prepared to pay for when it comes to online sound, video and written material, paying to avoid ads tops all three categories. This is especially true for young people.

“Having access to unique material also increases the will to pay, but generally the will to pay for online material is low. One explanation could be that people feel they are already paying for the infrastructure (broadband) and the technology (the computer, tablet or mobile) and therefore don’t want to pay once more for the content,” says Ingela Wadbring.

TV hardest hit?

Although daily newspapers are worst hit, the technological development means everyone is competing against everyone. Newspapers have TV broadcasts which can be viewed from your computer, tablet or mobile.

“During the trial of Anders Behring Breivik, NRK had an enormous bus outside the court house, and TV2 a somewhat smaller one. But VG-TV, with their simple video cameras and laptop editing, had more viewers than NRK and TV2 combined,” says Kjell Aamot, the former CEO of Schibsted, the owners of VG and Aftenposten in Norway, and Aftonbladet and Svenska Dagbladet in Sweden.

“We put a lot into the free newspaper 20 Minutes in several European countries, but these kinds of papers have no future

either because everyone gets their news on their mobiles,” he says.

Media in the Nordic region has made dramatic cut in the number of journalists they employ. Iceland was hit early and the hardest during the economic crisis. 2012 was Sweden's bleakest year when 900 journalists were made redundant. The crisis hit Norway a bit later, while cuts in Denmark now also include the Danish Broadcasting Corporation which has made 200 journalists redundant and wants to close down its symphony orchestra.

Bright future

While the number of people wanting to study journalism is falling, the opposite is true for communicators, for whom the future looks bright.

Nearly nine in ten people who studied strategic communication at the University of Lund were in work six months after graduating. One third had jobs even before they finished, according to a survey done at the university. They have many titles: communicator, market assistant, PR consultant, online editor, project leader and head of communication.

“It is inspiring to see that our students find jobs as easily as for instance lawyers, economists and system analysts,” says Charlotte Simonsson, head of the university's department for strategic communication.



Stefan Svallfors

Influential shadow people colour the political agenda

Today's Swedish government minister is on average surrounded by eight to ten so-called policy professionals. They work as communicators or policy advisors and have great influence over which issues are confronted and driven forward, even though they work in silence and with unclear mandates. These are some of the results from a new research report due to be published in the spring of 2015.

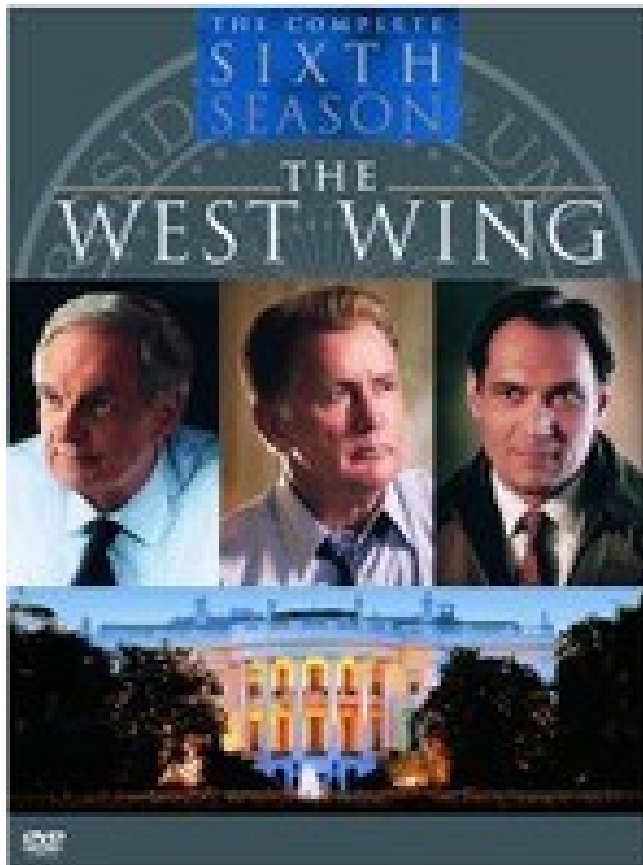
THEME

12.09.2014

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“What surprised me the most was that policy professionals are so sceptical to elected politicians. They are borderline brutal in their description of traditional politics as being slow and tedious. They could not imagine working in that way themselves. They consider themselves to be smarter than the

elected politicians, and think their jobs are exciting, fun and an efficient way of influencing policymaking,” says Stefan Svallfors, Professor of Sociology and one of three professors behind the report which is due to be published in 2015.



The idea for the research project on policy professionals emerged in the mid-2000s. At that time many were glued to their television screens watching the West Wing, captivated by the President's clever staff — Chief of Staff Leo, the Deputy Chief of Staff Josh, Communications Directors Sam and Toby and Press Secretary CJ. What would, according to the TV dramaturgy, President Bartlett have been without them?

In Sweden similar structures were emerging around politicians and decision makers in organisations and companies, without there being any real knowledge or debate around this fact. This made Stefan Svallfors and colleague Bo Rothstein, Professor of Political Science, curious. Together they began to develop a research application. They also involved Cristina Garsten, Professor of Social Anthropology, in order to describe this new group of professionals from a social anthropological, sociological and political scientific perspective.

“For many years we had been talking about something new which was taking place in Swedish society and the way in which people worked politically. We wanted to take a look at who these political advisors were, what they were doing and where they were coming from,” explains Stefan Svallfors.

Nordic differences

The emergence of this politically influential group is different in Sweden from the other Nordic countries. A Danish government minister usually brings one press secretary when he or she takes on a ministry. In Sweden you find a group of eight to ten people around a leading politician. Norway is somewhere in between the two.

“The group's growth in Sweden is a symptom of the organisations' political crisis with falling membership numbers. The political advisors and communicators see this job as an alternative channel, a way to express themselves politically without subscribing to the entire package,” says Stefan Svallfors.

The Swedish example can be explained in different ways. There are examples from political history; the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) researcher Rudolf Meidner, together with Gösta Rehn, became the authors of Sweden's social democratic wage policy. And even Tage Erlander, Prime Minister between 1946 and 1969, appointed political experts to his closest group to serve as a sounding board and discussion partners — among them Olof Palme. During the 1990s the formal corporate decision structures were also being demolished, as The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise left many corporate arenas leaving space for more political initiatives and creating new political dividing lines.

Ahead of the 1994 EU vote the doors were opened for PR agencies too, with a well-funded yes campaign seeking help to get their message across. Since then the number of political employees — both the ‘fixers’, i.e. those who can handle the political game and the media, and the ‘thinkers’, those applying themselves to the content of policies — has grown, especially in the past ten years.

“If you ask whether it would be possible to manage without these communicators and political experts the answer is “impossible, they have become invaluable”. It's a kind of arms race between organisations and companies. “They have 50 employees, so we must also have that”,” says Stefan Svallfors.

Well educated city dwellers

After two years of systematically mapping the group and 70 interviews later the researchers have a pretty clear idea of who the policy professionals are, what they do, what drives them and what political influence they have.

The 2,000 to 2,500 people working as policy professionals are well educated and linked to big cities. They are on average around 40 years old and many have studied political science or economy, mainly from universities in Stockholm or Uppsala. They earn relatively well and the group are made up roughly by the same number of women and men. There are slightly more men the closer they work with business. The interviewees have been employed for a short amount of time, approximately two years, and many have been hand picked for their new jobs. Recruitment is quick and informal especially to a higher political level, like to the government offices.

Once inside a political block or organisation, they don't move between blocks or organisations with conflicting interests. There is however more breadth among PR agencies who would like to offer their clients policy professionals with different backgrounds.

Their university educations prepare them badly for what they need to do — there is for instance hardly a single line about the function and role of policy professionals in politics to be found in the key political science textbooks.

“One result of this is that a large portion of power becomes invisible. My guess is that a majority of people believe politicians write their own speeches. They never do. With invisibility comes a lack of responsibility too. It is not the policy professional who ends up in the glare of the media when something goes wrong, even if he or she has contributed to a bad decision. The government minister responsible does,” says Stefan Svallfors.

Formulating problems, process knowledge and targeting

Policy professionals are found in the government offices, but also on a local and regional political level. They are found in companies and organisations and their influence is considerable, says Stefan Svallfors. He cites interviews where a person might refer to issues and terms which he or she has created in the first place and which little by little has become established terms which are being used and understood by all.

“Those we have interviewed are generally aware that they enjoy a lot of power, and some interviewees might say “yes, I have more influence than an MP”. They reflect on their own power, but also think it is OK,” says Stefan Svallfors.

Policy professionals work to identify problems, to learn the process which leads to decisions being made and to pass a question through a big network as quick as lightning and present the correct facts. They sell their knowledge about some of these tasks and this determines their worth. It means they have great influence in everything from getting a question onto the public agenda to determining which description of reality should become dominating. Is for instance unemployment a sign that the economic incentives for applying for a job are too weak, or is it a sign of a tough labour market? The way in which an issue is described can to a large extent be attributed to policy professionals, e.g. who is best at getting their message across. Stefan Svallfors says he can now hardly read a single newspaper without wondering who has launched a certain issue. And how it has been done.

Knowledge about all the parts of the political process is also important to the policy professional. When should an issue be launched — often the earlier in the process the better. Where does the political landscape lie, and how can you turn a special interest issue into one of public interest? Another important task is to get hold of the correct background material when this is needed. It cannot be incorrect. If a government minister during a TV interview says one measure will cost 50 billion, the figure must be right. If not you end up compromising the minister’s credibility.

“Delivering the wrong information is the worst mistake a policy professional can make. It must be both correct and fast in order to work. That’s why the network is so important. They need to know who to call to get the right information fast.”

Media schizophrenia

Policy professionals have a split attitude to the media. On the one hand good media coverage of “your thing” is the best possible reward, or to hear your own words come out of the government minister’s mouth during a live TV debate. On the other hand they see the immense media pressure elected politicians face from early morning to late in the evening, which means the report’s interviewees are not tempted to become politicians themselves. They are also discouraged by the scrutiny which politicians come under, or as some of the interviewees put it “there’s a whole herd of journalists out there who only want to plunge the knife into you”.

The study has also looked at the group’s relationship with the media, the political parties, voters, the elected representatives as well as civil servants.

When it comes to the relationship with the media the researchers notice a worrying trend; there are fewer and fewer journalists compared to the number of policy professionals. In Gothenburg, for instance, the number of journalists has been halved in the past ten years while the number of communicators has doubled. This means the city and its businesses have two communicators for every journalist working at the largest newspaper. A serious development, considers Stefan Svallfors.

“There has been a fundamental change in the balance of power and the independent journalist is totally undermined. This is not good for democracy,” he says.

Money plays a larger roll in politics

Money is another major problem. It is expensive to have a group of communicators or other PR people at your disposal.

“Money is quite obviously more important in Swedish politics than it used to be. There is no longer an army of volunteers, you must buy resources and it is not free.”

Full-time politicians have always had an advantage over elected part-time politicians, and with a completely professional staff specialising in PR and communication, the difference grows even bigger.

“Parliament risks becoming a transport firm where special advisors tell party members how they should vote. Similarly, every motion will be scrutinised before it is passed on, and of course you as an MP can present it regardless, but you risk paying a high price and not be elected at the next elections.”

Inspired policy advisors

Yet Stefan Svallfors is careful to point out that the survey’s interviewees are not a gang of power hungry career climbers.

They are often inspired and burn for the issues they work with. And since they don't see work as elected representatives as an alternative, they would not have been working in the political field if this alternative did not exist.

“They are there now and channel their energy into politics. You could also ask whether they are not as good at listening to what is important or even better, despite the fact they are more socially selected than the average MPs,” says Stefan Svallfors.

He points out that their mandate as researchers has been to map what is going on, not to present solutions. Yet there are problems he wants to address.

“I want to see ethical guidelines for this group. What is their position and responsibility? I also think we need transfer rules for how they can go from a public position of responsibility to other jobs, for instance in the private sector,” says Stefan Svallfors.

From journalist to spin doctor and back

Journalists becoming communications advisors, or in particular spin doctors to politicians, often say goodbye to journalism for good. But not always. Three former spin doctors tell us about their return to the media world. They all agree their time ‘on the opposite side of the table’ has made them better journalists.

THEME

12.09.2014

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Businesses and politicians alike are increasingly hiring journalists as their communications advisors, and for many journalists it means a permanent career change. Parts of the media sector are principally opposed to hiring journalists who have been spin doctors or communications advisors for private companies. But there are exceptions to the rule: some ex-spin doctors return to the media trade, and they say journalism benefits from journalists who have tried life behind the closed doors of political negotiations and central management.

So says Jakob Høyer, a trained journalist and a spin doctor between 2001 and 2003 for the then Conservative Minister for Culture Brian Mikkelsen. He went straight from the job as a spin doctor to be the culture editor for the Berlingske Tidende newspaper, and then editor in chief for the daily metroXpress.

“I returned to the media trade with deep and valuable insight into how the central administration works, and with a new and more nuanced view of the media. From the other side of the table I could see how many nuances disappear in the media’s coverage of an issue, because it goes so incredibly fast.”

Jakob Høyer thinks talking about ‘objective journalism’ is antiquated. Media have prejudices too, some more than others, he finds.

Spin doctors a new phenomenon

When he became a spin doctor in 2001 it was a new thing for Danish government ministers to employ prominent news journalists from leading news media as their personal advisors, and the reactions were considerable. Jakob Høyer came from being culture editor for Jyllands-Posten, and he remembers that when he said he had been given a new job as a spin doctor he had to clear out his desk at the newspaper and leave the building immediately.

“I was asked to leave without delay. At the time it really was considered bad form and it was something people in the media trade turned their noses up at.”

He reckons the antipathy today is less severe, but he still hears editors declare they would never hire a journalist who has been a spin doctor or communications advisor for business.

“The reluctance has diminished, but it is still there and it is a shame because media lose out on insight into politics which they cannot get otherwise.”

Jakob Høyer did not himself find it problematic to become a culture editor straight from advising the then Conservative Minister for Culture.

“When I returned to journalism I’m sure there were some who doubted that I could do critical journalism, but I was never a member of the Conservative Party, and as culture editor I helped create very critical culture journalism — for one thing because I knew the subject matter so well.”

He points out that there will always be a risk that journalists get too close to their sources, but that risk is no bigger for ex-spin doctors than it is for other journalists.

“A business journalist can also get too close to a company, and a sports journalist too close to a sport star. It is always the duty of journalists and media houses to keep an eye on this and react to it.”

A cooling off period could be necessary

That risk can in some cases make it relevant to introduce a cooling off period for journalists who have been spin doctors. So says another former spin doctor who is now back in the media business, Ulla Østergaard.

Like Jakob Høyer she trained as a journalist and worked as a political reporter and editor at the Jyllands-Posten newspa-

per before becoming a spin doctor for the former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (the Liberal Party) in 2001, who was then the Minister of Interior and Health. After her spin doctor job, Ulla Østergaard became an editor with TV channel TV2 News.

“No matter the type of job, an employee carries some loyalty to the former employer and has a lot of confident information which it would be unethical to disclose as a journalist. That’s why I would have imposed a cooling off period for myself if I had become a political reporter again. I didn’t become a political reporter, but chose instead an editor’s job,” she says.

In her job as editor her spin doctor past has, however, been controversial several times, including when she was responsible for TV2’s 2010 election coverage.

Like Jacob Høyer she has never been politically active, and believes herself to be able to work for most of Denmark’s political parties. She also believes the spin doctor’s access to the ‘machine room’ of a political party and to the central administration can benefit journalism.

“It can result both in a better and more critical journalism. I am for instance more aware of the need for a story’s angle, and to give officials a fair chance to present the facts.”

Objectivity; an illusion worth aiming for

Amalie Kestler thinks the same. She has been head of press for Copenhagen’s Social Democrat Lord Mayor Frank Jensen. Before and after that job she she worked as an editor for several different media.

“It is natural to have a debate about whether you can go back and forth between journalism and communication. You always need to make a concrete assessment. I believe I became a better journalist through my experience from the Copenhagen Town Hall.

“It is one thing to write about political processes based on sources who tell you what it is like. It is something else to experience it close up. It means that you as a journalist later on can use that knowledge and find stories which many other would not see. But of course there are job changes which should be carefully considered from a journalist ethics point of view. There might also be issues you cannot or should not be writing about for a while afterwards.”

She believes the idea of objective journalism is dangerous to journalism itself.

“Objectivity is an illusion, but of course you should always strive towards being objective when you work with news journalism. It is, however, really important to always be aware of how and why you as a conveyor of news is being used and allow yourself to be used by politicians or other interested parties. Being aware of this gives you the best balanced reporting. The worst thing is journalists who believe they

are being objective, but who in reality are running someone’s errand without being aware of it themselves.”

Amalie Kestler has been a political reporter for years and considers political journalism to be “a serious issue”.

“As a political reporter you have a lot of influence, and I think it is incredibly important to use that power with care. You should always think about the context in which you find yourself when you write. This is actually difficult, and it should be difficult. Nobody is perfect. But I believe the goal must always be to stick to the point and to be critical to everybody and to write the stories as correctly as possible. Which again is nearly impossible, because everything is in the eye of the beholder.”

Amalie Kestler has left traditional news journalism and is now the editor at the daily Politiken’s opinion pages, where she writes editorials and opinion pieces. But she still believes in striving for objective journalism when it comes to news journalism.

“I have left the news genre for views, where the list of ingredients is clear because the messenger is clear; a journalist or a medium. People can make up their minds about what you are writing and to the messenger — they can agree or disagree. I don’t pretend to myself or to the reader to be objective, even though I always try to be to the point according to my own and the paper’s definitions. This is different from news journalism, where striving for objectivity is a natural and correct goal.”

Editor in chief believes in common sense

The daily Information, where Amalie Kestler became political editor after her time as a spin doctor, has some rules for hiring a journalist who has worked as a spin doctor, explains Information’s editor in chief Christian Jensen:

“We have nothing against that type of hiring in principle and at Information we have previously hired one former political advisor. What matters to us is to maintain our integrity and trust, so we would never hire a journalist to cover the same subject matters as that person was responsible for as a spin doctor. This could lead to conflicts of interest.”

There were no such conflicts when the paper made Amalie Kestler political editor after she had worked as a spin doctor for Copenhagen’s Lord Mayor, the editor thinks.

“As a niche paper we don’t particularly write about Copenhagen Municipality, and I have not experienced any problems in that regard,” says Christian Jensen.

He reckons it is too “holy” not to hire former spin doctors on principle. Use common sense instead is his advice:

“Look the individual journalist in the eyes and consider whether that person can be trusted to let you know if he or she ends up with a story where there’s a conflict of interest.

It can happen to us all, but in that case the party concerned should be taken off the story and given a different one.”



Sylvia Björn, union representative at Hufvudstadsbladet

Finnish media jobs disappearing fast

For the first time ever there is a considerable problem of open unemployment among journalists in Finland. There is also substantial hidden numbers since many are working less than they would like or take on extra non-journalistic work in order to make ends meet.

THEME

12.09.2014

TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, PHOTO CATA PORTIN

In the past five to six years more than 1,000 jobs have disappeared from the newspaper trade alone, and there are no signs the trend is turning.

“Open unemployment is something new,” says Professor of journalism Tom Moring at the University of Helsinki.

He says the labour market for journalists is undergoing a restructuring. Newspapers’ loss of readership and advertising income are reaching double figures. Commercial TV compa-

nies are cutting back and the public service broadcaster Yleisradio is having its funding slashed.

“Everything points to fewer jobs for journalists, but we still don’t know how many.”

Sombre mood

Proof that the trend has definitely not turned yet can be found at Helsinki’s daily Hufvudstadsbladet. There is a sombre mood when the Nordic Labour Journal visits the editorial

offices in Mannerheimvägen 18. The owner of Finland's largest Swedish-language daily, KSF Media, have decided to cut one in five jobs across the group. Nearly 50 full-time jobs, including 30 journalist positions, will go. The group's newspapers will buy more material from freelancers instead.

"I have been worried for a long time that we have been waking up to this too slowly. For ten years now we've known what is going to happen, and you could ask yourself why not more is being invested in Finland," says the union rep Sylvia Bjön, who has taken part in negotiations.

It might come as news for many in the Nordic region that Finland has ten Swedish-language daily newspapers. The papers in the largest group, KSF Media, are owned by a wealthy foundation, Konstsfundet, which for a long time covered the losses. But the figures are beginning to be so pitch black that far too much of the foundation's money is being spent on covering the deficit. The solution: everyone must reapply for their own jobs, and then the employer decides who no longer fits in with the new organisation which comes into being at the end of the year.

"Legally speaking it is a question of whether an application form for an existing job agreement is valid — so this is not actually applying for a new job," explains Bjön.

She is worried about what readers will think when the printed newspaper's resources are cut while more resources are put into the digital edition.

Language barrier disappears

Others are suffering from the downturn too. The big media group Sanoma which publishes the country's largest morning paper Helsingin Sanomat has already been through several rounds of negotiations and is selling off assets in order to pay off debt.

Journalists have long tried not to think about the daily papers' crisis.

"Many still think it is obscene for journalists to care about how the owners make money," says Sylvia Bjön.

The newspaper crisis is not only about money. It is also linked to the media and journalists' position in society as whole. And it is about an inability to reinvent the media world. To add to the problem, Finnish media have been behind a language barrier which no longer protects them when it comes to young people's media habits, where the English language no longer is a problem. Local papers seem to have managed best with their loyal readership and advertisers. Still, it is also worth noting that four out of five Finns read a daily paper.

Hidden unemployment

Unemployment among Finnish journalists is around 7.5 percent, according to statistics from the unemployment benefit

fund Finka. The President of the Finnish Union of Journalists, Arto Nieminen, says there is probably hidden unemployment which statistics do not show. Not all journalists are members. Many freelance journalists are also forced to take on other jobs in order to make ends meet. Just over 10 percent of the union's active members have registered as freelancers and that number has been constant for a couple of years. The number is somewhat lower than in for instance Sweden. Surveys show that freelancers earn just two-thirds of what people in full-time jobs performing the same tasks make.

"Finland is still in a different situation compared to Sweden, where temporary work is common," says Sylvia Bjön.

She is also the deputy leader for the Union of Journalists' council and a member of the negotiating delegation which is now working out a new collective agreement. The Union is also discussing whether to do like the Danish and welcome people who work in the communications trade.

"In recent years we have talked a lot about expanding the Union of Journalists. Should it only be a union for journalists who follow journalists' ethical rules?"

Arto Nieminen thinks it is often impossible to spot the difference between editorial content which has been produced for company webpages or content produced for media - for instance food programmes.

Journalists are clearly worried about the future, and it is therefore apt that the Union of Journalists course for union reps this autumn focuses on how to handle job insecurity.

Leaving journalism

Some journalists choose to leave the trade for a communications career. Mathias Järnström, owner and CEO of the communications agency Milton, says journalists' expertise is sought after because companies more than ever before need to understand the ecosystem within which they operate.

"People with journalist backgrounds are interested in social issues."

Järnström feels there has been a change in attitudes in recent years. While Swedish journalists for a while now have thought it is OK to work with PR and communications, their Finnish colleagues have been somewhat slower to change their attitudes. Many who have been working with politics and journalism are doing very well in the communications industry. He does not think this is problematic for the public debate.

"Not really. In general I think we work far too much in our own little boxes in Finland, it is good to broaden out."

Between 4,000 and 4,500 people work with market communication in Finland, compared to just over 10,000 active

journalists according to the Union of Journalists' membership lists.

Surveys still show relatively few journalists move into the communications trade. It is an occupation where you need special skills and journalists are often too media fixated to fit in.

A few decades ago there was no communications education and the number of journalists used to be considerable, more than one third. According to Elina Melgin, Managing Director at The Finnish Association of Communication Professionals, Procom, the number of members with a background from journalism is now around seven percent. The association's membership is growing fast, but except for some high profile media personalities, career change is not a strong trend, according to Melgin.

"It is still possible to make a career as a journalist if you have an interesting personal profile and a knowledge base to build on," says Tom Moring.

Labour market mobility for journalists has increased, but no Finnish studies have been looking at where journalists go. Tom Moring assumes there will be opportunities in the borderlands between digital and visual presentation.

In Sweden a recent study by Professor Gunnar Nygren looked at why journalists leave the Swedish Union of Journalists. It turned out the majority continued working with journalism, but those who leave are first and foremost young people with short work experience and no steady job. Half of them are in some way involved in PR and communications in addition to their other work duties.

Working environments influence quality in the media

Investigative journalism and the media's role in a democracy are the main arguments used by media companies when they ask for special treatment. There is a debate in all the Nordic countries over the media's framework — should they be exempt from paying VAT and should digital media be subsidised?

THEME

12.09.2014

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The Norwegian foundation Fritt Ord has carried out a survey showing public trust in journalists and the media is depressingly low. The Norwegian Work Research Institute has also published a report showing how the working environment in editorial offices influences quality.

Fritt Ord commissioned the Institute for Social Research in Oslo to carry out the biggest survey of Norwegians' opinion on the media since 1999. Some of the results include:

- One in three people have little or no confidence in the media investigating their own social role.
- Two in five do not believe the media are free and independent from their owners and advertisers.
- One in five do not believe the media are free and independent from the state.
- One in three do not believe the media look at issues from several different angles.

"So we have low confidence in the media performing their social role which the media themselves consider to be so important. This is problematic for the media," says Elisabeth Staksrud, one of the researchers behind the study.

In Norway the social role is set out in what is called the 'Be Careful Poster'. It says "a free and independent press is one of the most important institutions in a democracy".

Behind the scenes

"It has never been easier to voice your opinion or file reports. What we need to maintain an informed public debate is that someone can carry out quality journalism and go behind the scenes and see what is really happening," says Asbjørn Grimsmo, co-author of the report 'Journalistic quality — what role does the working environment play in the editorial office?' with Hanne Heen.

It is hard to believe the massive cuts to editorial jobs would not influence quality, write the two researchers. They point to a survey of journalists from the spring of 2012 where 69 percent of a representative group from the Norwegian Union of Journalists said they feared cuts would impact on quality.

Grimsmo and Heen's study looks at whether companies with strong social capital, defined as possessing collaborative skills, trust and righteousness, are also more quality oriented, creative and productive compared to companies with weak social capital.

To measure quality, for example, they have used 11 different criteria and compared this to how journalists answer in existing major surveys on working environments. Do they follow the ethical guidelines, is there a culture for discussing management's priorities and do they publish their own editorial finances, and so on?

They have also used criteria for social capital and compared it to what journalists have answered to questions on whether editorial staff trust each other and whether employees trust information from management.

A link between social capital and quality

By comparing the answers to the questions about social capital with answers relating to quality and creativity, they found a link. Yet there is no statistic correlation between how engaged employees were and the quality of their work.

"Social capital and creativity has approximately the same impact on quality. Variations between the two can explain nearly 20 percent of the variation of journalistic quality between editorial offices," says Asbjørn Grimsmo.



Eygló Harðardóttir, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Gertrud Åström and Margot Wallström

Feminists, but also masculinists

The Nordic region has cooperated on gender equality for 40 years. It has been of great importance for equality's progress and has improved the lives of Nordic citizens, said Eygló Harðardóttir, Iceland's Minister of Equality during the anniversary celebrations in Iceland on 26 August. Where is the debate today? Is there a need for a new equality narrative?

INSIGHT

12.09.2014

TEXT AND PHOTO: BERIT KVAM

"The dream is that we some time in the future no longer need to discuss gender equality, when genders no longer are as important as they are today, that we have equal pay and that girls and boys can choose the job they want without anyone thinking their choice is odd," said Eygló Harðardóttir, who opened the debate at the anniversary conference alongside Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Margot Wallström.

The debate looked at gender divisions in the labour market, equal pay, unwanted part-time work and boardroom and leadership gender quotas. But new issues popped up too. Professor Hege Skjeie asked whether we need legally imposed quotas for democratically elected bodies. Researcher Steen Baagøe Nielsen showed how campaigns using stereotypical male images lead men away from choosing non traditional educations and jobs. Youth politician Óskar Steinn

Ómarsson wanted to see a broader discussion on equality which includes the third gender, which is neither female or male.

100 years of voting rights

"40 years is a long time. It is nearly half my lifetime," said Iceland's former President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world's first democratically elected female head of state.

"Back then it looked like fast men were busy elsewhere when gender equality was being discussed. Today it is a joy to see that the men are interested in equality politics."

It is 100 years since Nordic women won the right to vote and to be elected. The Finns celebrated their anniversary in 2006, Norway one year ago, Denmark celebrates next year and Sweden will mark the event in 2021.

“A lot has happened in 100 years, but the fear that women would take over now looks exaggerated,” she commented with a smile.

“Yet nothing happens by itself, it is important to carry on fighting. Major tasks await us; equal pay, equal right to parental leave. This is very important for the relationship between the sexes,” said Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and highlighted more areas where change is needed.

40 working days in front of the mirror

“Rights is something we need to fight for. We need to fight for peace, democracy and balance. Women do not have the same access to democracy and also not the same access to media as men. The Internet has not changed this. Even in 2014 we read a lot about how women look. It is not surprising that women spend a lot of time in front of the mirror. Women spend one hour a day in front of the mirror. Media and advertising do everything they can to try to shape women.”

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir pointed to the importance of power to gain influence:

“Much is being said about power, but you need a lot of power to gain influence. Gender equality is also men’s responsibility,” she continued, and called herself a masculinist:

“I am a feminist, but I am also a masculinist,” she said, and pointed to the danger of young men dropping out of school.

“Men are getting a bit afraid of women, especially when they discover what women are worth and that they are doing well in the education system.”

A need for a men’s conference?

“I think we should organise a men’s conference,” suggested Vigdís Finnbogadóttir.

“Important men with power in the world should meet each other just to discuss gender equality. I have the impression that men are afraid, that everyone knows that women are able, and that men are afraid of women’s power.”

Eygló Harðardóttir has been leading the Nordic cooperation during Iceland’s Presidency this year, and sees the benefits of countries that share the same values exchanging experiences.

“Iceland has been at the forefront when it comes to parental leave legislation. Norway led the way on the law on boardroom gender quotas. In this way we inspire each other,” said Eygló Harðardóttir.

“Now we need to talk about how we continue to be even more equal. The best situation is for a workplace to be 50/50. There are many good things in the Nordic region, but there is also a lot to learn from other countries. Norway and Iceland have legislation on boardroom quotas, but other countries have more female leaders than we do. That takes us back to education choices, the fact that both genders now choose

very traditionally,” continued Eygló Harðardóttir during the debate.

Margot Wallström, ex-EU commissioner and former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, commented on the idea of a men’s conference:

“A major conference for men with power focusing on gender equality is an interesting thought. That way violence would no longer be a women’s problem but an equality problem.”

Nurseries the most important milestone

40 years of Nordic cooperation on gender equality provided a chance to look both forwards and backwards. Which milestones have been reached and which challenges remain?

“You couldn’t look back without mentioning the development of child care, like nurseries, and women’s access to education as being absolutely crucial. The building of nurseries has been a completely decisive factor for allowing women to enter the labour market,” said Margot Wallström. Where would women’s equality be if we didn’t have the offer of nurseries? This is also about tax politics, welfare politics, it is about offering women jobs and it is about being able to support yourself. Legislation is an extremely important tool in gender equality politics, she said.

Margot Wallström was disappointed over the lack of government ministers attending the event:

“If there is no political will to carry this forward and make it into reforms and change, then not much is really happening. I think that is a sad state of affairs. With EU membership you pull in different directions, but you still see the Nordic countries among the top 10 in gender equality statistics. The development of gender equality has pretty much happened parallel to developments in welfare and in society as a whole. I guess it is this which is about to break up,” she says.

“In Sweden, for instance, there is no will to regulate parental leave, to say that more fathers must take daddy leave. It is an individualised approach.

How do you see the Nordic cooperation going forward?

“I think gender equality, education and environment politics are among the areas where we need to cooperate. When it comes to gender equality, working life, education and male participation represent very important issues.”

More quotas?

A comprehensive anniversary programme helped raise a range of problems and challenges for a more equal society. Professor of Political Science Hege Skjeie used her lecture to highlight the fact that we do not have a Nordic policy for gender balance in democratically elected bodies, and threw down this challenge:

“Do we need legislation for quotas in democratically elected bodies?”

Associate Professor at Roskilde University, Steen Baagøe Nielsen, showed that there is strong engagement among men for increased gender equality. But how do you make sure men's engagement is taken seriously?

“There is a sharp rise in men's participation in the home. It is not as strong as women's participation but it is increasing. What is needed for men's experiences from working with children and in the home to be seen as being relevant for working life? How can men be involved in care work?”

Steen Baagøe Nielsen demonstrated several examples of how campaigns aimed at attracting more men to work in the care sector build on male stereotypes, and asked for more to be done to change stereotypical attitudes.

“We need a long-term drive to inform and influence attitudes, not least among young people.”

One of his examples was from a successful project in Norway aimed at attracting more men to work in nurseries: nearly 10,000 men had been recruited to nurseries over a 20 year period, between 1990 and 2009.

“Remember to listen to these men,” said Steen Baagøe Nielsen.



The third gender

A panel of youth politicians provided some forward-looking suggestions, raising questions of families, gender identity and gender-based education choices.

Óskar Steinn Ómarsson from Iceland wanted to see a broader gender equality debate which would include the third gender — people who are neither female nor male.

“What is the danger here? Where is the debate on this? Discrimination of homosexuals and transsexuals? We must not allow legislation which differentiates between different discrimination laws, we need a unified law.

Maria Kristina Smith raised the issue of abortion rights, which she said was politically tabu in the Faroe Islands.

“We have very strict legislation, you must be very physically or psychologically ill or the victim of rape in order to be granted an abortion. But in reality it has all to do with which doctor you see. It's an extreme sport. To talk about abortion rights from a Faroese rostrum is tantamount to political suicide.”

Swedish Sara Skyttedal said gender equality is something we need to work with across policy areas.

“Feminist Initiativ, FI, doesn't appear out of nowhere. White middle-class academics talk and talk but never arrive at this.

“A young anti-racist equality movement is growing in Europe.”

“Iceland's feminist movement has experienced an enormous growth. It is particularly popular among young people,” said Óskar Steinn Ómarsson.

“We have had 40 years of this cooperation and 100 years of voting for women, we are tired of salary gaps, tired of the rape culture which exists in the Nordic region, tired of the existing stereotypical ideas of gender. I work in a nursery myself, where three out of 30 workers are men. Girls wear only pink and boys wear all kinds of colours except pink. All the girls are princesses. One of them was a Superman princess. This begins as soon as they are born, boys and girls are put into different boxes. Our governing political parties must show a willingness to act and to get rid of these rape cultures or else we will establish new parties like for instance Feminist Initiative.”

Alexander Blum Bertelsen from Denmark felt it was important that Denmark introduces earmarked parental leave; men and women are different and must be given the same chance to enjoy a career and parenthood.

Li Andersson from Finland agreed. Parental leave divided into 6 + 6 + 6 would help change gender roles, she thought. She also wanted better advice for new students because education choices remain so traditional.

Mathilde Tybring-Gjedde from Norway wanted to help strengthen vocational training, which sees the greatest number of early leavers. She wanted to see a skills report for female-dominated jobs, and more business focus in female-dominated jobs.

Maria Kristina Smith thought the debate on gender equality had stagnated.

“We need a new feminist narrative in order to highlight how useful this is. In the Faroe Islands we are still trapped in the question over full-time versus half-time work and access to abortion, and it feels like we haven't moved at all in the past 20 years.”

We can do a lot through legislation, but the biggest problem is attitudes, said Óskar Steinn Ómarsson. Nothing much happens unless these are changed. We need to break down the gender structures. This must begin in school. There are no male or female jobs.

“There will be no change if everybody carries on as usual.”



The Faroe Islands' future must be more than fish

What will the Faroese live off when there is no more fish? Is the answer oil or tourism? The important thing is to create jobs for women in the archipelago which is more patriarchal than other parts of the Nordic region.

INSIGHT

12.09.2014

TEXT OCH PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Questioning the future of fish is like swearing in the Tórshavn Cathedral. The EU has just lifted its sanctions against the archipelago after a long-running dispute over mackerel. Salmon farmers are benefiting from the fact that their toughest competitor, Norway, is facing a boycott both from China and Russia.

The Faroe Islands are part of Denmark, but has autonomy in most areas except foreign and defence policies. Like Greenland, the archipelago is not a member of the EU. With 49,000 citizens, only Åland is smaller within the Nordic region.

The Faroe Islands are part of the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation Nora, together with western Norway, Iceland and Greenland. Out of all the members, the fishing industry employs a far larger percentage of the Faroe Islands' labour force:

Region	Percentage fisheries
Norway (coast)	2.0%
Iceland	4.1%
Greenland	13.8%
Faroe Islands	15.4%

Figures from the OECD: Nora Region, 2008. Greenland from Statistics Greenland 2012, the figure also includes agriculture.

An annual catch of 600,000 tonnes and salmon farms producing 60,000 tonnes a year shows there is no danger of the fish disappearing anytime soon. But employment within the sector is falling along with an increase in vessel size and improvements in processing efficiency. In the year 2000, 23.4 percent of the Faroe Islands' total labour force was employed within fisheries and the processing of catches.



Helgi Leonson on one of the many ponds at the Hiddenfjord salmon farm

Tourism important — oil is coming?

Iceland's tourism industry recently outgrew fishing as the country's biggest sector, while Greenland is focusing on the mining industry.

There has been drilling for oil in the economic zones of both Greenland and the Faroe Islands. So far nothing has been found, but the number of wells is still small. In the Greenlandic sector 11 wells have been drilled and off the Faroe Islands the ninth hole is being drilled by Statoil. Iceland has granted three licenses, but no drilling will take place there until 2017.

Oil companies began drilling for oil in the Norwegian parts of the Barents Sea as early as 1980, but did not see any major finds until they had drilled over 90 wells. Comparing the four areas also serves as a reminder of the distances involved. Several thousands of kilometres separate the wells west of Greenland from the Barents Sea. Oil companies do move rigs from one sector to the other, however, so countries and regions compete with each other and make up a joint labour market offshore.

"1,800 Faroese already work in the oil sector, and only some of them are employed because of drilling in the Faroese sector," points out Runi M Hansen, head of Statoil's Arctic drilling unit, himself a Faroese.



We meet him in a yellow warehouse in the harbour where Statoil has set up base.

"All drilling activity must go via Faroese harbours and airports. Drilling for oil is a major operation that employs hundreds of people on drilling rigs, supply and standby vessels, in equipment manufacturing, helicopter transport and so on," says Runi M Hansen.

Many wells before finding oil

Earlier this summer well number eight was drilled, and it was dry. Right now Statoil are drilling well number nine, close to the British sector, not far from where a find has been made.

Runi M Hansen says the Faroe Islands have prepared well for a potential find.

"All legislation is in place and we are also happy with the amount of skilled labour we have. Attitudes to the oil industry are positive, also within the fisheries sector," he says.

If a major find actually happens, much will change in the Faroe Islands.

"If we find oil it will become easier to stand on our own feet. I believe a lot will happen politically in that case. There is a certain unease when it comes to the issue of independence. Personally I hope we would get full independence from Den-

mark,” says Annika Olsen, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs in the Faroese government.



She is part of the Faroese People's Party Fólkaflokkurin, while Prime Minister Kaj Leo Johannesen is from the Faroese Unionist Party, who wants to maintain the current relationship with Denmark. On the left of Faroese politics there is a similar situation; one party supporting independence and one opposing it.

Bigger airport gave more tourists

In order to maintain the Faroese population level it is important to have good jobs for women too, however. It is mainly young women who remain in Denmark when they finish their studies there.

Like Iceland, the Faroe Islands are putting their trust in tourism. The airport used to be a bottleneck since it could only receive smaller aircraft with no more than 92 passengers. This summer the runway has been expanded and a new terminal has been built, allowing aircraft with up to 144 passengers to land.

“Even more importantly we have been able to improve the frequency of flights. More aircraft can land now during the month of July, when we have a lot of fog,” says the airport CEO Jákup Sverri Kass.

We visit the Faroe Islands as work to expand the airport is at its most hectic. You notice a major difference from the rest of the Nordic countries right away: there is not a single Polish construction worker. Current rules only allow for the import of labour from outside of the Nordic region if unemployment falls below 3.5 percent. Icelanders and Greenlanders have boosted local labour instead, since many Faroese work abroad — mainly in Norway because of high salaries there.

"No Disneyland"

The tourism industry employs some 400-500 people. The short season is a real challenge. In the high season hotel rooms are 70 percent full, but this falls to 10 to 20 percent in the low season. The airport expansion is crucial for the

tourism industry, which has an annual turnover of 400 million Danish kroner (€53.7m)

“We have 100,000 visitors every year, and 65,000 of them arrive on cruise ships. Last year we had 50 vessels. We aim to double the turnover by 2020 to one billion Danish kroner (€134.3m),” says Gudrid Højgaard, Director of Visit Faroe Islands.



The archipelago is being marketed as something special and different.

“We are the opposite of Disneyland. Nothing is fake, there are no fences. Nobody tells you how to experience our nature, there aren't any no-go signs. People are tired of Iceland,” she claims.

She admits that the Faroe Islands have one problem — the annual slaughter of pilot whales who are hunted towards the coast. There have been various attempts at informing the world about the ancient tradition, and recently 100 journalists were invited in an attempt at spreading some counter information. The whale hunt used to be an important protein source.



“The meat is shared in an incredibly democratic fashion. Widows and orphans are first in the queue. I don’t know how many tourists who choose not to come because of the whale hunt. But it is a sensitive issue. The world has become alienated,” she says.

During our visit we see several times how the closeness to food production, meat and fisheries is still a major factor.

“There are limits for what you can communicate — we get emails which are nothing but hate - hate - hate.

“Social media and media geeks make it worse. But we are getting some positive emails too. Yet we’re a small destination. When Norway was in the spotlight because of whaling, we got 400,000 postcards in one year,” says Gudrid Højgaard.

Patriarchal society

Others, like Deputy Prime Minister Annika Olsen, are worried the Faroe Islands are too dependent on hunting and fisheries.

“The big question is why do women not thrive?”

“We are a patriarchal society There aren’t enough jobs for women. The big infrastructure projects linked to the construction of two subsea tunnels worth two billion Danish kroner will not result in many jobs for women. But they do mean the two largest islands will get stronger links. Travel times between Tórshavn and the second biggest town, Klaksvík, will be halved when the two tunnels are ready in 2019 and 2021.”

They will make things easier for those who want to shop or experience culture too. And that includes the young women who often end up staying in Denmark after graduating. Copenhagen is often called the city with the most Faroese — 20,000 compared to Tórshavn’s 17,000.

Annika Olsen is therefore proud to show us the shop Guðrun & Guðrun which sells knitted jumpers and other clothing. It is run by Guðrun Ludvig and Guðrun Rógvadóttir, who have 30 women who knit for them. Their major breakthrough

came via the Danish TV series “The Killing” where Sofie Gråbøl wore a jumper designed by Guðrun Ludvig.



Guðrun Ludvig is the designer at Guðrun & Guðrun

The university is important

The University of the Faroe Islands also helps young people stay put by offering more degrees.

“But the university does not have a shared campus; it is spread over five different sites. Those who study in Denmark get a 5,000 kroner grant. Here they only get 3,700. And it is more expensive to live here,” says Headmaster Sigurð í Jákupsstovu.

When the OECD was commissioned to study the Nora region, one of its main recommendations was increased cooperation between the universities and colleges in the region. But everything does, of course, come down to the availability of jobs also for those with a university degree.

“There are no quick fixes. The Faroese government recently presented 37 different initiatives to attract newly educated women,” says Johan Dahl, the Minister of Industry and Equality.

One initiative was to extend parental leave by four weeks. Compared to the rest of the Nordic region the Faroe Islands have a considerably higher number of women working part-time. The Nordic average is 35 percent, in Finland only 19 percent of women work part-time yet in the Faroe Islands the number is 64 percent.



Mikael Sjöberg, Director-General for the Swedish Public Employment Service, wants to turn criticism to trust through continuously working for improvement

Mikael Sjöberg: rebuilding trust in the Public Employment Service

Mikael Sjöberg again leads one of Sweden's most important working life institutions. His challenge is to build trust in the Public Employment Service, which has come in for a lot of criticism.

PORTRAIT

11.09.2014

TEXT AND PHOTO: BERIT KVAM

On 17 March the Reinfeldt government appointed him Director-General for the Swedish Public Employment Service. He came from the post of Director-General for the Swedish Work Environment Authority, and before that he led the National Institute for Working Life

"I have to go and pick up my son from nursery," says Mikael Sjöberg to the Nordic Labour Journal, checking his watch.

It is nearly four in the afternoon. We have been sitting around the conference table for about an hour. Him on one side, on the other sits Refik Sener, his advisor, press contact and prompter when needed. What was that book he's currently reading called again? Refik Sener helps: 'The Time of the Hero'.

He has been a stay-at-home dad with both children, he says. Three months with his daughter and nearly four with his son,

the younger of the two. A typical Nordic father of small children in that respect: collecting them from nursery, taking parental leave, having a wife who works and sharing parental responsibilities with her. Still new in his job as leader for one of Sweden's largest authorities with more than 12,000 employees, he confesses he doesn't get to do the nursery run that often anymore.

"There is a lot to get to grips with, so I don't do nursery pick-up as often as I would have done normally."

He has embarked on a long journey of change to improve the Public Employment Service.

"There has been a lot of criticism, and we are still facing a challenging situation. At the same time I come to this job with enthusiasm and engagement for creating a better em-

ployment service and proper change. But it is important to realise true change takes time.”

Mikael Sjöberg’s formal education was short, but he has had one of the country’s fastest moving careers after going from working for the Metall trade union to entering politics — first as an advisor to the Social Democrats after they won the 1994 elections, then 10 years as an undersecretary of state before Göran Persson’s government appointed him Director-General for the National Institute for Working Life in 2005. Soon after that, the Reinfeldt government came to power and the Moderate Party closed the National Institute for Working Life down. But Mikael Sjöberg continued his lightening career. He now has ten years’ experience as Director-General for Sweden’s most important working life authorities. The only top job missing from his CV now is leading the Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

After five months at the helm of the Public Employment Service he has not yet finished developing a strategy for the future, but the method for progress is clear: the leadership group and employees will be involved before decisions on improvements are made.

About leadership

“I believe one important thing for modern leadership is the ability to create visions and to say ‘this is how a future employment service should look like’ and ‘this is the way we will be going’. This goes for the agency as a whole and for parts of it. In the leadership group we’re now working on creating a journey of change. This depends on us managing to create visions for how ‘the Public Employment Service 2021’ will look.”

«The Public Employment Service 2021»?

“Yes, because we are using a method which I have been using for many years. To achieve real change we spend around one year on preparations and three plus three years of development work. This first year we’ll create the basis for identifying goals, for visions and strategies. You then break this down into a strategic plan for the next three years for what you should achieve. When this is put into action you start to see where you have succeeded and where you have not, and you start to create a new strategic plan. So a seven year period like this contains these three elements. One preparatory year and three plus three execution years.”

It is nearly six months since he started the job. So far he has initiated the internal restructuring. Two leadership groups have been reduced to one, with fewer top leaders and an increased focus on the core tasks.

One of his strategies is focusing on digital channels and he has appointed a head of digital contacts. The process forward is to create visions together with the entire leadership group comprising 25 - 30 people. These visions can be for employer contracts, visions for the IT systems, for matching and skills

improvement. The point is to make it clear for everyone which goals are being targeted.

“The method is based on getting the leadership group to help me formulate the vision. We will then spend the autumn travelling to visit employees and discuss these issues before we finish this journey in February next year. We want to give employees the chance to reflect over the direction which the leadership is about to take, but also to open up to input from them so that they too can influence developments before I make a decision. So the idea is that the principal decision will be taken by next summer.”

How to turn criticism to trust?

“The Swedish Public Employment Service has long suffered from a lack of public trust. What’s important now is that we really get an idea of how conflicts arise and what creates conflicts and a lack of trust. We need to highlight the situations where jobseekers are disappointed with us, or when a person feels we’re not doing our job in a satisfactory manner.

“To do this we need to dive deep into this issue in order to hit the target with our improvements. Earlier the Public Employment Service has tried to ask: were are we failing? This proves that there has been a lack of analysis of where the problems lie. You need to ask the customers, you need to ask the jobseekers and employers, not only yourself.”

Trust is a massive issue for Mikael Sjöberg and one of the things he himself highlighted as the most important when he was appointed to the position.

“Modern research has looked at what makes certain countries thrive. What is so incredibly interesting is that citizens’ trust in authorities is crucial when it comes to the position of trust elsewhere in society. If citizens’ confidence in the authorities is high, they also have high confidence in politicians and they trust each other. And this means that we who work in an authority have a particularly important role to play in running our affairs in a way which creates a high level of trust.”

How do you think people will react to this kind of slow journey towards improvement?

“A job like this is based on introducing improvements all the time. I’m fond of saying that many different steps must be taken. My dream is that the final step will be hardly noticeable. It will be just a small adjustment. All the improvements will happen as we go along over these six years. It means that we after a while will create a better functioning authority, but it is not until six, seven years from now that we can say that we are a fully functioning, efficient and modern authority.”

Matching employee to employer

Mikael Sjöberg is under no illusion that he will be able to solve Sweden’s high unemployment singlehandedly. Politicians need to act. Youth unemployment, for instance, needs

to be tackled by politicians creating a well-functioning school system.

“When it comes to the matching moment, everything will be easier if we have a high level of trust, good employer contacts, and job centres know and are in contact with their surroundings. This can be complemented with good evaluation tools. Being good at assessing a person is important for all of our workings.”

Mikael Sjöberg thinks politicians both recognise the Public Employment Service’s importance and that they expect it to succeed.

“I’m very much under the impression that the government is trying to create conditions for me to allow us to succeed. It wants the Public Employment Service to become a better authority and it demands change, and it is very keen to listen to me. We have a good dialogue about our resources and about what we need going forward.”

Sweden’s general elections are just around the corner. Mikael Sjöberg has ten years’ experience as undersecretary of state in a Social Democrat government.

Given the choice, would you prefer being Minister for Employment or Director-General for the Public Employment Service?

“This job suits me far better.”

Which experiences from your job as Director-General at the Work Environment Authority are coming in handy now?

“A basic understanding of leadership and for authorities’ roles in public administration. We had a very aggressive development programme at the Work Environment Authority. It was almost too much. When I arrived we had been asked to shave 35 percent off our total budget.”

He explains how he went through the budget, removed ineffective services and returned to these a few years later when they had identified better methods for instance for school inspections.

At the Public Employment Service it is only the labour market training which is having a “far too low effect”, he says.

“So we need to ask ourselves what we do about this, and start development work. How much should we have, which services should we have, how do we follow this up. My approach is to allow the bosses to answer these questions and then we’ll see what they suggest.”

Leadership through trust

Mikael Sjöberg is soon off to travel around Sweden to meet his employees; 12 stops with around 1,000 employees at each stop. Is it possible to create engagement with 12,000 employees?

“Yes, but not on an individual level. However, management can communicate with many employees if it has clear goals and visions, and if the leadership has a shared strategy. For an organisation it is important not to be dependent on the top boss. My leadership philosophy is very much built on each leadership level knowing their responsibility and that they are in dialogue with and support the next level.”

How do you explain the extreme trajectory of your career?

“There’s an old Swedish saying: Do your duty, demand your rights. I think that is quite nice. It means you should always do your best and be prepared to take your turn. If you have important tasks, doing your duty feels like a very important thing. I believe this has made a mark on me. The idea that you should leave your post in a better condition than you found it. This goes for any job. It is a driving force. You must change to be better to meet the future. These things didn’t exist seven years ago,” he says and points to his smartphone.

“My dream is that we should be so well-functioning all of the time that we decide ourselves when and how we should change, that the Public Employment Agency itself decides both the goal and the process.”

Mikael Sjöberg has also attended his first meeting at the international organisation the Public Employment Service, PES.

“That was very interesting. It was inspiring even though it was just a first meeting. It is no secret that we feel Germany has a well-functioning employment service. So of course I want to talk to my German colleague to hear what they have been doing, and I spoke to my Danish colleague who also is quite new. The Nordic family has much to learn from each other.”

“It’s a shared culture,” says Refik Sener, who has been quiet for a long time.

“The Nordic cooperation is always something I want to prioritise,” says Mikael Sjöberg.

Then he is off to the nursery. His son is waiting.

Researchers: Employment has become more important than job content

Working life has been on the agenda during the Swedish general election campaign, and especially unemployment. More jobs are needed. Yet visions for the content of those jobs have not figured politically — an inconsistency highlighted by a group of researchers at a recent meeting in Stockholm.

NEWS

10.09.2014

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“Those who award research grants no longer focus on the power structures and organisation of labour. Or like a group of working life researchers observed when we met the other day: ‘everyone knows that if you want money, don’t mention the word power and perhaps not even the organisation of work, in your application’,” said Åke Sandberg, Professor Emeritus and editor of the book ‘Nordic Light’, as he opened the seminar ‘Power and leadership in working life’.

The seminar was organised by the think tank Arena Idé and the Workers’ Educational Association (ABF). Judging from the busy Olof Palme hall in ABF’s central Stockholm headquarters, people are interested in discussing work in a deeper perspective. Around ten working life researchers threw light on the organisation of work, leadership trends, equality, “New public management” — an increasingly dominating management process within the welfare sector — flexibility as well as the challenges facing the Nordic model.

Unemployment has taken over

To illustrate how work development ambitions have changed over the decades, Åke Sandberg looked back in time. He started with the 1960s when the social partners worked together to develop a good work environment and productivity on a local level. In the 1970s trade unions were strong and there was talk about developing good jobs — having a nice time at work was no longer enough, there was a need to identify what made jobs good in terms of wages, opportunities for skills development and the importance of work organisation.

“Since then we have seen a weakening of the trade union side of things, and unions are no longer at the forefront of developing new ideas. Unemployment has taken over as the important issue,” said Åke Sandberg.

Working life research has followed a similar development. The 1970s saw the growth of a strong research environment focusing on work and organisation. This was severely weakened with the closure of Sweden’s National Institute for Working Life in 2007. Yet now Åke Sandberg sees increased interest both at home and abroad for working life research and for studying companies and work based on the jobs’ content. He uses the Lisbon strategy as an example. Its first ten year strategy, published in the year 2000, aimed to make Europe more competitive and dynamic. It talked about ‘More and better jobs’. A 2005 strategy review only talked about more jobs. The EU programme for 2020 talks about more jobs and better lives.

“Work organisation and issues surrounding power and influence in working life seem not to be priorities among those who finance working life research. Today’s focus is more on social issues and to some extent on medicine and health. Employers and trade unions struggle to agree that applied research should study power and influence. Unemployment perhaps is easier to study,” said Åke Sandberg.

Nordic model: praised and challenged

One of the seminar’s major questions was how powerful the Nordic model still is, despite weakened trade unions, more non-secure jobs and benefits cuts. What is happening to people’s trust in the public sector and to being able to feel safe even during times of change in working life? The Nordic model is indeed praised for its ability to offer safety during life’s different phases, and for offering people the chance to change. But how much can the model’s individual parts be eroded before it can no longer be talked about as being unchanged?

Åke Sandberg, who earlier this summer wrote an opinion piece for the Swedish daily Dagens Nyheter called ‘The

Nordic model can face the world', says we should not forget that the Nordic countries top most world rankings, e.g. for equality, democracy in working life, environment, enterprise friendliness, IT and more. There has also been a certain reluctance to follow advice from certain international cheerleaders who say everything would be even better if only the Nordic countries cut taxes and red tape a bit more.

"But we haven't gone for that, and we should be proud over what we have and carry it forward. We have a model that works, it is standing up to pressure from the rest of the world but it is changing somewhat," said Åke Sandberg.

The Danish term 'flexicurity' is often used to express the combination of safety and flexibility. But what happens to security when the number of non-secure jobs increase in most countries and when focus is more on the individual than the collective mass? Annette Kamp, a researcher at the Roskilde University RUC and a co-author of 'The Nordic Light', sees the danger of trying to export 'flexicurity' as a trend. It is a concept which is dependent on the context in which it exists, she said.

"Flexicurity is about finding a balance between safety and flexibility, but that balance has been weakened in Denmark through an erosion of safety. Meanwhile the term is still being used as if nothing has happened. But you need to be able to see when the imbalance becomes so great that talking about flexicurity makes no sense anymore. This means we need to talk about differences. If we don't, we lose the measure of how the model works," she said.

So how bright does the Nordic light shine? Is the Nordic model still an ideal and something people can learn from? Does it reach, say, all the way 'down under', to Australia? Yes, says Australian researcher Russell Lansbury, who was visiting Sweden during the seminar.

"The light is still there, but it is shining a little less brightly than before. In a radio programme I was asked to name the three best things about Sweden. I answered knowledge, the dialogue between the social partners and — perhaps somewhat surprisingly — globalisation. Sweden has always been looking beyond its borders and chosen export over protecting its domestic market. Today's weakness is the dialogue between the social partners. It's still there, but seems to have lost some of its strength and depth which helped create today's society," said Russell Lansbury.



OECD's Secretary-General Angel Gurría warns against further wage cuts

OECD: Wage cuts will not create jobs

Industrialised countries have reached the limit for how much wages can be cut. Since the start of the economic crisis, wages have fallen in real terms for half of all employees in OECD countries. Further cuts could be counter-productive and damage growth.

NEWS

03.09.2014

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: OECD

This was the message from the OECD's Secretary-General Angel Gurría when he presented the 2014 OECD Employment Outlook.

"While wage cuts have helped contain job losses and restore competitiveness to countries with large deficits before the crisis, further reductions may be counter-productive and neither create jobs nor boost demand," Angel Gurría told a Paris press conference on 3 September.

According to the OECD, unemployment in member countries will fall somewhat in the next 18 months, from 7.4 percent in mid-2014 to 7.1 percent at the end of 2015. Nearly 45 million people are unemployed within the OECD. That is 12.1 million more than before the financial crisis hit in 2008.

No real wage growth

According to the Employment Outlook real wage growth has been nearly stagnant since 2009, and in many countries —

including Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Spain — it has fallen by two to five percent a year.

“Governments around the world, including the major emerging economies, must focus on strengthening economic growth and the most effective way is through structural reforms to enhance competition in product and services markets. This will boost investment, productivity, jobs, earnings and well-being,” said Angel Gurría.

This is partly a new message from the organisation which represents 34 of the world’s most industrialised nations. Gurría underlined that countries with the largest budget deficits before the crisis were not doing anything wrong by cutting costs and slowing wage growth.

“It has helped them restore competitiveness. But this might not be the right remedy in the future.”

Although the situation is of course more difficult for those who have become unemployed, the economic crisis has also hit those who managed to keep their jobs.

“There is a lot of opposition to cuts in nominal wages. Instead we have seen cuts to bonuses and overtime pay. But money is money, and families’ purchasing power has suffered,” said Angel Gurría.

Minimum wage in 26 countries

Since prices have not fallen in line with wages, most people are worse off. Increasing the minimum wage, like the USA and Germany have done, at least helps those at the bottom of the salary pyramid. This year’s employment outlook also features statistics on work quality. Increased flexibility is no panacea either.

“Less than half of those in temporary jobs got permanent jobs three years later,” Angel Gurría pointed out.

26 of the 34 member countries have now introduced a minimum wage — a solution opposed by Nordic trade unions because they want to retain the opportunity to influence wage negotiations. But the OECD also wants minimum wages to be implemented in a manner which gives them maximum effect. Regional differences should be taken into account, as well as differences in age and skills.