

Small Countries, Media, and Cosmopolitan Thinking

Dominic Hinde

Copenhagen was hot on 25 June 2016. The night before, thunderstorms had rolled across the city and I had drifted off to sleep on the sofa of a Danish colleague in Amagerbro while watching the results of the referendum on EU membership come in.

The next morning he had got me booked in as a talking head on DR's results show to discuss what it all meant. It wasn't the first time I had worked for DR – I had been freelancing with their European correspondent in Scotland and northern England for the past few years and popped up as an analyst for DR and SR in Sweden.

Standing in the atrium at DR Byen on the south side of Copenhagen, I was struck by the realisation that my route to being there could not have happened without the unique experience I had as an undergrad student at Edinburgh under Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, and his continued support and guidance through my PhD. At a time when universities obsess over graduate trajectories and employment statistics, it was a timely reminder that you can't always plan or quantify what will happen, but when you get there, the path all makes sense.

The Nordic countries are all famously Anglophilic to varying degrees, but it does not always work the other way. Very

few news organisations currently have staff correspondents in any of the Nordic countries, with responsibility usually falling under the jurisdiction of Berlin bureaus. As a result, the distinctiveness of the Nordic countries both as a geo-cultural bloc and as individual nations is underrepresented and often oversimplified on the world stage.

During the Second World War and all throughout the Cold War, news from Scandinavia was considered an important part of European coverage, Scandinavia being both a near neighbour and a bulwark against Soviet interests in the North Atlantic and the Baltic. The reorganisation of the world after the 'End of History' in the early 1990s and burgeoning discourses on globalisation led to a reduction in the European capacity of the BBC and others, and a redirection towards Asia, Africa, and what were regarded as important developing economies. Northern Europe was, in the newly unified and harmonious world of the post-communist era, a done deal. In a global news cycle which shifted from reporting on trade deals and international conferences to the real-time happenings of wars, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters, the Nordics simply did not offer the ratings and engagement that British and American broadcasters and newspapers were looking for.

By the mid 2000s, the only English-speaking publication with a dedicated Nordic correspondent was the *Financial Times*, and that was more as a hangover from business reporting on the oil industry (the correspondent was based in Oslo) than from a genuine interest in the cultural and political life of the Nordics. As I found out, this lack of a baseline also had tangible structural effects on the way important stories from the Nordics were reported. Sometimes features would simply be done over the phone from London or Washington, or a camera crew with a pre-agreed idea of the form the story would take would drop in for a few days at a time. Media labour and

how it is structured are crucial to issues of representation in international affairs, and the cultural and social knowledge of journalists is vital to achieving a genuinely cosmopolitan field.

This has led to the creation of an incredibly skewed vision of the Nordics in the English-language media in particular. Whereas standing correspondents have more freedom to pitch their own expert ideas and will usually have an allocation of stories to fill multiple slots, the freelance model of foreign reporting that dominates in the Nordics and elsewhere today fundamentally changes interactional and editorial control. Instead of being able to explain to the public why something is important (or just interesting, which can be a question of form as much as newsworthiness), foreign reporting today requires pitching news to editors who may have little concept of what is happening on the ground.

The immigration discourse in Scandinavia is a case in point. Populist right-wing parties in Scandinavia have been successful at making themselves visible in the international media as a legitimate political response to social problems, playing on preconceived notions of the Nordics as being too politically progressive or as having taken immigration 'too far'. The way in which articles are commissioned often asks journalists to prove or disprove these simplistic visions, or to seek out and profile the supposedly concerned citizens behind the movements.

Nowhere was this clearer perhaps than with the international news discourse around 'no-go zones' in Sweden heralded by the Trump presidential campaign in the US. By invoking Sweden as an example of a failed and violent multicultural society in line with the international presentation of the populist right, the race was on to find out the truth about Sweden. In one of the more farcical episodes of American projection, Tim Pool, an independent journalist who had made his name reporting on social movements and gang violence in New York and Chicago,

ventured to Malmö with the explicit aim of telling Americans what life was like in the dystopian suburbs of contemporary Scandinavia. All he found were public libraries and an efficient local bus system, and a crime rate lower than Glasgow.

The idea that the clean high-tech society of the modern Nordics and the dystopian and destabilised cityscape are one and the same never makes it to the table, however. DR Byen is a jewel at the centre of an expensive redevelopment of the Copenhagen waterfront, creating an area of high house prices and wealth stretching from the north side down to Amager Strand. This is the flipside of Copenhagen's 'problem' working class and ethnically diverse suburbs, setting up islands of pristine Nordicism that win architecture prizes and attract fawning coverage for sustainable living, surrounded by the spectre of encroaching difference which is not so much alien as an integral part of the new Nordic model.

We don't see any nuance to these perspectives often enough in the Anglophone media, and it is becoming harder and harder to push for cultural knowledge as an end in itself. In the name of globalisation and shifting priorities, the attacks on European cosmopolitan learning within British universities are increasing in severity, with programmes being undermined and minority languages disregarded as a costly indulgence. The existence of modern languages departments – be it Danish, Estonian, Spanish, or Romanian – is critical to fostering cosmopolitanism and its intellectual benefits, and I owe my whole career to the education I was given in Scandinavian Studies in Edinburgh and the opportunities it afforded. The sociologist Ulrich Beck referred to cosmopolitanism and its enemies in the battle for the future of Europe, and it is hard not to see modern foreign languages as being at its front line.

Bjarne Thorup Thomsen had a huge impact on my development as a writer and as a researcher, always embodying the idea

that small places had rich and important histories, but moreover that to make sense of them meant using the cosmopolitan gaze and asking the right questions.