Article

The Politics of Culture in Journalism: News Media Consumption Across Political and Cultural Public Spheres

Andreas Widholm *⬤ and Anna Roosvall

Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University, 115 93 Stockholm, Sweden; anna.roosvall@ims.su.se
* Correspondence: andreas.widholm@ims.su.se

Abstract: Scholarly discussions around the significance of journalism for democracy and the public sphere have traditionally centered on news and political journalism. Consequently, there is a dearth of studies on the role of politics in other journalistic subfields. This paper addresses this research gap by examining the democratic contribution of cultural journalism in Sweden. Drawing on public sphere theory and agonistic democracy theory and utilizing data from a nationwide Swedish survey (N = 1804), social variations in consumption are analyzed, including the types of content that motivate people to consume cultural journalism. Results indicate that age, education, and political preferences are important correlates in relation to high consumption of cultural journalism. Furthermore, the findings indicate that societal debate is a more significant driver of cultural journalism consumption than traditional aesthetic coverage. This underscores the distinctive democratic role of cultural journalism within the media landscape and its particular contribution to the diversity of journalistic content.

Keywords: cultural journalism; public sphere; political news; democracy; cultural wars; news consumption

1. Introduction

Scholarly discussions on the significance of journalism for democracy and the public sphere have long been centered around news and political journalism, for instance, distinguishing between roles journalists perform in political life and everyday life (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). It is primarily through traditional news, whether published on new or old platforms, that people are expected to inform themselves about political issues (Esser et al. 2012). Hence, studies of journalism seldom explore societal–political aspects outside this scholarly comfort zone, despite the fact that media organizations produce plenty of specialized content where political issues play important roles (Penney 2022). One such example is cultural journalism, often found in specific sections of newspapers devoted to culture and entertainment and in cultural news and magazine programs on radio and television. Cultural journalism is a branch of journalism that encompasses news, reviews, and critique about all sorts of culture—arts, popular culture, entertainment—as well as societal debate and ideological–political matters discussed by specialized journalists and intellectuals, often through an interpretative, argumentative or literary style (Riegert et al. 2018; Kristensen 2019). The emphasis on culture vs. societal issues varies between national contexts, with the Nordic countries employing a broader approach compared to the more limited arts journalism tradition (Kristensen and Riegert 2017)

Although the definitions and practices of cultural journalism vary, four main trends characterize the development over the last decades. First, cultural journalism has undergone a process of popularization, where the content gradually has gravitated more toward popular culture, entertainment, and lifestyle issues, complementing traditional art criticism with a broader concept of culture, including cultural news (Kristensen and From 2015; Widholm et al. 2021). While this catering to a broader citizenry rather than to narrow niche audiences can be viewed as a form of democratization (Kammer 2015), it has at the same time caused worry among cultural journalists that the treasured high quality of cultural journalism is threatened (Sarrimo 2017; Larsen and Ellingsberg 2024). Secondly, research shows

that cultural journalism contributes not only to the cultural public sphere but also to the political public sphere through coverage of diverse 'cultural wars' subjects such as freedom of speech, racism, and climate change, seen through a 'cultural filter' (Riegert et al. 2015; Penney 2022). Swedish cultural journalism has, in this regard, been concluded to be more explicitly political than in comparable countries, contributing agonistic democratic values and empathic and emotional perspectives that are rarely seen in other types of journalism (Riegert and Hovden 2019). Thirdly, studies show that cultural journalism is closely interlinked with cultural globalization, both in terms of wide geographical scope in the coverage (Janssen et al. 2008; Lauronen et al. 2019) and through an inherently transnational rather than international outlook to the world (Roosvall and Widholm 2018). Fourth, scholars have pointed to a decline of authority for cultural journalists as a consequence of new amateur and post-industrial forms of cultural criticism emerging through blogs and the usage of a variety of social media platforms. Scholars have argued that the guiding function of cultural journalism has thus been weakened as such platforms have the potential to generate new authorities in the cultural public sphere (Kristensen and From 2015; Kammer 2015).

While the trends, tensions, and characteristics of cultural journalism described above have been well documented in previous research, we still know little about what drives or motivates consumption of cultural journalism or about people's attitudes toward cultural journalism and cultural journalists. Drawing on results from the nationwide SOM survey in Sweden, the aim of this article is hence twofold: First, to provide descriptive audience data on demographic variations in consumption, the types of content consumers prefer, and their views on the authority and role of cultural journalism in society with respect to values and opinions. Second, to demonstrate and discuss what these results, together with the previously identified content characteristics, reveal regarding cultural journalism's contribution to the public sphere. In doing so, we wish to contribute to the understanding of intersections between the cultural and the political in the public sphere (Habermas [1962] 1989; Gripsrud 2017; Jaakkola 2015), to discuss the ideas of spheres vs. more limited and more specific 'spherules' (Bruns 2019), and to further the understanding of cultural journalism's democratic role in terms of agonistic ideals (Mouffe 2013). Hence, our empirical research questions and the way we relate them to theory read as follows:

- RQ1a: How widespread is the consumption of cultural journalism in Sweden, and how does the consumption vary across demographic groups? RQ1b: What importance does cultural journalism thus have for the constitution, and more specifically, the extension of the public sphere(s) or spherules?
- RQ2a: What types of content motivate people to consume cultural journalism, and how do these motives vary across demographic groups? RQ2b: Where does this place cultural journalism in relation to previous divisions of cultural and public spheres?
- RQ3a: To what extent do consumers of cultural journalism perceive their cultural tastes and values to align with those of cultural journalists, and how does this perception vary across demographic groups? RQ3b: How does this relate to agonistic democratic ideals?

Together with previous results on cultural journalism content, the answers to these questions will help us attain the aim of demonstrating and discussing cultural journalism's contribution to the public sphere. In the following, we discuss the theoretical approaches we draw on and provide some examples of conclusions from previous content and interview studies that have guided the design and theoretical framing of the current study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Connecting the Cultural and the Political in View of the Public Sphere(s)

Jürgen Habermas famously distinguished two separate public spheres, a main political one and a complementary literary or cultural one (Habermas [1962] 1989). Following Jostein Gripsrud (2017), we use the term cultural rather than 'literary' or 'cultural and literary' public sphere in this article, as its characterizing functions concerning identity, empathy,

and argumentation are not limited to literary issues and discussion forums, but rather has a broader cultural scope.

The relationship between the political and the cultural in public sphere theorization is, however, not necessarily dichotomous or distinctive. Jaakkola (2015, pp. 32–33) terms, for instance, the political and the cultural as halves of one sphere and notes that they are connected in a way that makes culture subject to discussions about political citizenship and participation. This often entails an assumed hierarchy between the cultural and the political in public sphere discussions, where the cultural is positioned as being on the side, or optional, which is notably mirrored in a pecking order between news and political journalism vs. cultural journalism (Jaakkola 2015, p. 40); see also (Nussbaum 1995, p. 2) and (Tyndall 2004, p. 24). Cultural journalism research has attempted to oppose these 'pecking orders' by problematizing public sphere theory and focusing more on the cultural than on the overtly political side of the public (Gripsrud 2017; Knapskog and Larsen 2008; Kristensen and From 2015). In this study, we take these developments as a point of departure for a further discussion of intersections of the cultural and the political, with a focus on the importance of the political in the cultural.

Following Mouffe (2005), we make a distinction between 'politics', which is institutionalized traditional political practice, and 'the political', which encompasses ideological expressions played out in numerous societal venues, providing ideological alternatives where heterogeneity and respectfully conflictual perspectives play substantial roles. Artistic practices, which cultural journalism covers and constitutes, have, according to Mouffe (2005), the potential to unsettle ideological hegemony in a 'post-political' condition, where attitudes of conformism, homogeneity, and moralism could otherwise hinder a thriving and dynamic democracy. The area of cultural criticism constitutes, for instance, a joint space for discussions of entertainment and broader discussions about politics, society, and public life, thereby linking them to each other (Jacobs 2012; Kristensen and Roosvall 2021). Aesthetic publics, argues Jacobs (2012), constitute a space for commentary about important issues that are of common concern. This cultural and political commentary has moreover been concluded to be distinct from other more overtly political commentary in studies where cultural journalism is compared to other types of journalism. A comparative study of Danish and Swedish opinion pieces about terrorism showed, for instance, that cultural discussions about terrorism were less polarizing, using less ethno-national antagonistic 'us vs. them' rhetoric, while at the same time using more multifaceted reference points, both regarding geography and regarding evoked fields, such as arts, philosophy, and politics (Kristensen and Roosvall 2017). Similarly, a comparative study of cultural journalism and news journalism on another terror attack (Riegert and Widholm 2019), showed that cultural journalism was integrative rather than divisive and, at the same time, more emotional, which corresponds to the prominent role of empathy in the cultural public sphere (Gripsrud 2017; Riegert and Hovden 2019). Thus, we argue that by underlining the specificities of subfields of journalism, as well as diverse parts and intersections of the public sphere, we can do more valid analyses of journalism—pinpointing specificities of its diverse parts, not letting news research speak for all journalism—and get a clearer and fuller picture of societal issues and their representation in the media.

2.2. Public Spherules and Transnational Public Spheres

Regardless of the degree to which the political and cultural are separated in public sphere theory, research increasingly discusses a plurality of public spheres, a discussion that has been augmented by the evolvement of online spaces for communication. Kammer (2015) claims that the popularization and diversification that go on in such spaces can be seen as forms of democratization because they make cultural journalism more inclusive and accessible. Sometimes, however, these spaces are seen as too small to constitute proper spheres, leading to the coining of alternative terms such as public spherules (Gitlin 1998) or spherules (Bruns 2019). Discussions on public spherules include notions of a feminist public sphere, international public spherules around environmental or human

rights issues, subaltern counterpublics, or taste cultures (Cunningham 2001). In the following, we discuss the more recent work on public spherules and subsequently focus—in relation to the public's consumption concerns regarding coverage of the world outside of Sweden—on the transnationality of public spheres/spherules.

Bruns (2019, p. 1) underlines, in a discussion about how much of Habermas' understanding of the public sphere is relevant 'as the mass media age comes to a close' (including the adjustments suggested by Habermas himself in (Habermas 2006), that there are now multiple publics in the public sphere. This is relevant in relation to the survey that constitutes the basis for this article in that we consider what part(s) of the general public consume cultural journalism and how this group may differ from other parts of the general public. The fragmentation of the public sphere into domain-specific spheres (e.g., cultural, political) recognizes that the roles and positions of actors differ across domains (Bruns 2019). Public spherules constitute even smaller spaces and contain more thematically focused actors. This limitation foregrounds actors who are especially engaged in discussions concerning particular sets of current concerns (Ibid). Cunningham (2001, p. 35) views such smaller spheres as 'social fragments that do not have critical mass [but] share many of the characteristics of the classically conceived public sphere'. If such publics are limited in time, they are sometimes termed 'issue publics' (Bruns 2019; Dahlgren 2009).

The relationship between domain-specific public spheres, public spherules, and issue publics is dynamic. Bruns (2019, p. 1) argues that in temporary issue publics, ideas are tested and that those that persist may gradually develop into public spherules, some of which may, over time, coalesce into domain-specific public spheres. While Bruns (2019) mainly takes the Twittersphere as an example of a new type of public sphere—which is not a key area in relation to the survey we base our analysis on—the discussion on how to detect public spherules and domain-specific public spheres becomes relevant for our analysis of cultural journalism consumers, since profile information of users in thematic clusters, including that of 'arts and culture', are assessed in Bruns' approach.

Nancy Fraser (2008), in turn, focuses in her later rethinking of public sphere theory on less subject-determined spheres, defined instead by geography by being *transnational*. Particularly in media studies, Fraser (2008, p. 76) underlines that 'discursive arenas that overflow the bounds of both nations and states' have been identified. This constitutes a challenge to ideas from democracy theory concerning how the media can hold officials accountable to 'assure that actions of the state express the will of the citizenry' (Ibid.) when the sphere is not considered geographically limited to the state. It matters in this sense also who can and does take part in public discussions and on what terms, since 'publicity is supposed to discredit views that cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to assure legitimacy of those that do' (Ibid.), which corresponds to the watchdog function of the media, generally put forward in discussions of democracy theory and the media. In our study, we attempt to establish connections between citizens' use of cultural journalism and results on the specificities of cultural journalism from our previous content studies where transnationalism has been concluded to dominate in terms of geographical scales.

2.3. Journalism, Democracy, and Agonism: Perspectives on the Cultural and the Political

Journalism has the double function of, on the one hand, disseminating and scrutinizing information and, on the other, facilitating dialogue; this is how journalism lives up to its democratic roles (Moe 2008). Thus, how the media argue and work as an arena for others to argue and how citizens relate to this becomes salient, and hence, we need to ask how citizens relate to opinion and knowledge, as we do in our survey. There are numerous models of democracy, each relating differently to journalism and citizens, attaching different requirements to them (Strömbäck 2005). The deliberative democracy model has long been highly influential in media studies (Wessler 2018). It is furthermore associated with the Habermasian division of the public sphere into separate political and cultural spheres, or halves (Jaakkola 2015, p. 33).

Since we wish to go beyond these ideas on sphere separation, and even more importantly, since previous studies on Swedish cultural journalism have shown that both content and professional ideals among practitioners are aligned with, and can be fruitfully read in relation to, the agonistic democracy model (with some variations between media and genres, see Riegert et al. 2015; Kristensen and Roosvall 2017), we will now zoom-in on the agonistic approach to democracy.

It is similar to a deliberative approach in that deliberation and argument are key, but the goal and the preferred form of reasoning is continuous confrontation instead of the final consensus that deliberative approaches aim for (Mouffe 2013). Agonism is thus at hand when people keep arguing in a conflictual consensus mode, where what people agree on (consensus) is that democracy should prevail, but not what methods are best suited to achieve the most preferable form (conflict). In this sense, agonism appreciates the role of affect in democracy (Mouffe 2013, p. 6), not in an antagonistic way, where enemy images would be created, but with an agonistic approach to conflict characterized by respect for the opponent (Chambers 2001).

The agonistic approach recognizes political dimensions in art as well as aesthetic dimensions in the political (Mouffe 2013, p. 91). Mouffe more specifically identifies artistic practices as ideal areas for an agonistic approach. Cultural journalism, our object of study, relates to this in two ways. It is a sub-area of journalism that is devoted to covering artistic practices, and it also in itself borders on artistic practice since it in part is constituted by texts that adopt a literary style. An interview study with Swedish cultural journalism editors concluded that the core of cultural journalism, in the view of press editors, was seen as a conflictual approach within a democratic rationale, i.e., as agonistic (Riegert et al. 2015). When it comes to cultural journalism content, the aforementioned Danish–Swedish study on opinion pieces following terror attacks showed that cultural journalism came out as agonistic, as well as less driven by antagonism, compared to political journalism on op-ed pages (Kristensen and Roosvall 2017). This distinction was especially salient in Sweden. In this article, we explore how these findings from content and interviews with practitioners—including how they embrace agonistic approaches—relate to the views and consumption patterns of cultural journalism users.

3. Methodology

The study draws on representative national survey data gathered in 2017 through collaboration with the SOM Institute in Sweden. The survey builds on systematic probability sampling, and the questionnaire was sent to 3400 people living in Sweden (age span 16–85). The response rate was 56 percent. Comparative analyses of SOM survey respondents and the demographic composition of the Swedish population indicate that, overall, the participants reflect Sweden's population well, though younger citizens are slightly underrepresented (Jansson et al. 2018). Since age is a factor we draw on in this study, it is important to note that while the age imbalance may have a minor impact on results for the entire population, it has no negative effects on the accuracy of findings for specific age groups (Jansson et al. 2018).

In order to analyze the consumption of cultural journalism in terms of audience reach (RQ1a), respondents were asked the following: How often do you consume cultural journalism? Cultural journalism was defined as 'articles or programs about for example music, literature, film, theatre and cultural debate'. The response options were as follows: daily, 5–6 days/week, 3–4 days/week, 1–2 days/week, more seldom, and never. In order to analyze social diversity among more and less frequent users, we draw on the following independent variables: age, education, gender, geography, and political identification on the left–right scale.

Assessment of motives (RQ2a) was operationalized in terms of the perceived importance of diverse areas of cultural journalism through the following question: 'How important is cultural journalism to you when it comes to keeping yourself informed about the following areas?'. We used a four-point Likert scale encompassing the options: very

important, fairly important, fairly unimportant, not important at all. It was applied to the following areas: (1) music, literature, film, theater, etc., (2) fashion and lifestyle, (3) the Swedish societal debate, and (4) events/happenings in the world outside of Sweden. The first area relates to the classical role of cultural journalists as guides and critics of cultural and artistic practices (Hellman and Jaakkola 2012), the second relates to the popularization of cultural journalism (Kristensen and From 2012), the third relates to the central role of political debate in Swedish cultural journalism (Riegert et al. 2015), and the fourth relates to the 'transnationalism' of cultural journalism in Sweden (Roosvall and Widholm 2018).

Lastly, the question of cultural authority (RQ3a) was designed in relation to subjective value correspondence, e.g., whether people believe that the values of cultural journalists correspond to their own values. We operationalized this in terms of a statement to which respondents could react using a four-point Likert scale (correct, fairly correct, fairly incorrect, not correct at all). The question read as follows: 'To what extent does the following statement correspond to your view on cultural journalism?', and the statement we draw on here is as follows: 'Cultural journalists' values are often consistent with my values'.

While questions of the type we use may involve a risk of social desirability bias, we sought to mitigate this as much as possible by using neutral question phrasing. In addition, the survey was anonymous, which further reduces the likelihood of biased responses. During the study's design phase, we considered including additional questions. However, given resource limitations, we decided to focus on the current set, ensuring they were thoroughly grounded in theory and formulated as clearly as possible.

To reveal demographic variations, the study uses a series of independent variables: age (ordinal), education level (ordinal), gender (nominal), and geographical place of residence (nominal). In addition, variations pertaining to political preferences are addressed. Here, we draw on a question where respondents were asked to position themselves on a five-point Likert scale ranging from clearly to the left (1) to clearly to the right (5), with (3) indicating 'neither left nor right'. The relevance of the left–right political scale has been debated over the past decade, partly due to ideological shifts. However, it remains significant within the Swedish political landscape. Studies testing alternative scales, such as GAL (green, alternative, libertarian) vs. TAN (traditional, authoritarian, nationalistic), reveal a considerable overlap between left and GAL positions on one hand and right and TAN positions on the other. This convergence is evident among both political parties and voters in Sweden, although it is weaker in some policy areas, particularly for liberal and Social Democratic positions (Bjereld and Demker 2020).

We address each research question through multiple descriptive bivariate analyses in terms of percentage distribution. However, to provide an overview of the results pertaining to consumption motives and value correspondence, we also utilize a balance measure ranging from −100 to +100. This is a well-established metric cf. (Bergström 2023) that combines affirmative and rejective survey responses into two respective groups, yielding a net measure of positive or negative evaluation for each demographic group. Negative values indicate a greater proportion of rejective responses compared to affirmative responses. The balance measure for value correspondence was calculated as follows: (correct + fairly correct) − (fairly incorrect + not correct at all).

4. Results

The consumption of cultural journalism (RQ1) in Sweden clearly differs from the consumption of traditional news. A total of 9 percent of the population turns to cultural journalism on a daily basis, which is a low number compared to news journalism more generally. The weekly consumption of cultural journalism is considerably higher and reaches 46 percent of the population. Given these patterns, we have clustered the respondents into three groups: high consumers (5–7 days per week), moderate consumers (1–4 days per week), and avoiders (more seldom or never). This allows us to analyze social variation in relation to the intensity of consumption (Table 1).

Table 1. Cultural journalism consumption across demographic factors (percent).

	High Consumers	Moderate Consumers	Avoiders	Sum	n
Age ***					
16–29	10.0	33	57	100	270
30–49	10.3	33.1	56.7	100	526
50–64	14.9	32.8	52.2	100	475
65–85	19.9	28.5	51.6	100	533
Gender **					
Women	16.3	33.6	50.1	100	918
Men	12.2	29.7	58.1	100	886
Education ***					
Low	8.2	12.9	78.9	100	256
Middle	9.7	29.6	60.7	100	544
Middle high	15.8	35.7	48.5	100	431
High	21.1	39.7	39.3	100	532
Geography ***					
Countryside	12.5	25.1	62.4	100	263
Small towns	9.2	30.5	60.3	100	348
Medium size towns	13.7	32.5	53.7	100	860
Big cities	23.7	37.2	39.1	100	287
Left–right preference ***					
Clearly to the left	22	34	44	100	200
Somewhat to the left	16.1	36.6	47.3	100	385
Neither left nor right	13.9	27.1	59.2	100	569
Somewhat to the right	12.6	34.9	52.6	100	430
Clearly to the right	7.5	27.3	65.2	100	187
Total	14.3	31.7	54	100	1771

Note: The table displays how age, gender, education, geography, and position on the left–right scale are associated with high consumption (5–7 days/week), moderate consumption (1–4 days/week), and avoidance of cultural journalism (more seldom or never). ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Previous studies of news consumption using the SOM survey in Sweden have identified age as one of the strongest factors that explain differences in news consumption (Wadbring 2016; Andersson 2019b; Widholm 2019). This holds true also for cultural journalism, but only for high consumption, which increases significantly with age, especially within the oldest age span, where it reaches nearly 20 percent compared to only 10 percent among 16–49-year-olds.

Moderate consumption does not increase with age in the same way and varies between 29 and 33 percent. Studies show that Swedish consumption of news journalism in general is widespread across the country, not restricted to people in certain geographical areas or to media consumers with a particularly high education level cf. (Andersson 2019a). Cultural journalism consumption stands out from this. The most salient distinction we found is related to education (Table 1). For the highly educated, high consumption is almost three times more common than less frequent consumption. Moderate consumption is more than four times more common than high consumption among people with less education. Furthermore, as much as 79 percent of those with less education are avoiders of cultural journalism. The importance of education for cultural journalism consumption is expected since education, like knowledge of art, music or literature, is associated with cultural capital (Lindell and Hovden 2018). Also, national geography seems to matter both for high and moderate consumption of cultural journalism; more than 60% of the avoiders live in the countryside and small towns, while only 39% of metropolitan dwellers are avoiders. Sweden's largest and most prominent cultural institutions, such as theaters, concert halls, and museums, are located in metropolitan areas, but another factor behind the variation could be that cultural journalism is often relatively marginalized in local newspapers.

Concerning gender, we found a significant difference between men's and women's consumption across all three groups examined. This may be connected to tendencies identified in other studies, showing that women are more engaged in cultural consumption and that they consume more 'soft' news compared to men (Poindexter and Harp 2010). Lastly, we found conspicuous differences relating to political leaning. People leaning clearly to the right are less prone to consume cultural journalism; as much as 65 percent are avoiders of cultural journalism. Accordingly, while high consumption is established to a considerable extent among left-leaning people (22 percent), the figures are much lower among right-leaning people (8 percent). Also, in this regard, cultural journalism consumption stands out from traditional news consumption, which is less bound to political identification. In this sense, cultural journalism appears to be an area of interest for studies of journalism and political aspects.

4.1. The Importance of Different Areas of Cultural Journalism

Turning to RQ2, what types of content do cultural journalism consumers value as important? As displayed in Figure 1, the transnational and political dimensions appear to be more important than the aesthetic and lifestyle dimensions of content. As much as 66 percent view cultural journalism as a very or fairly important source of information concerning what occurs outside of Sweden.
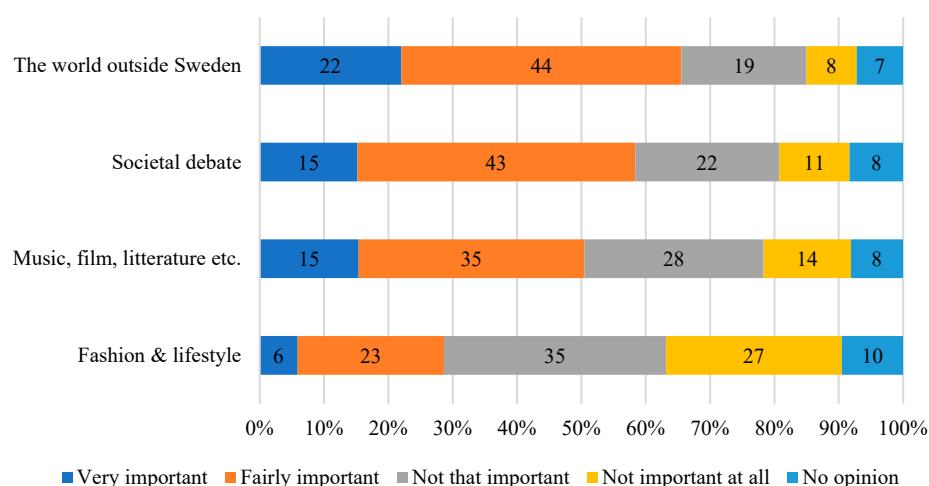

Figure 1. The importance of different cultural areas for consumers of cultural journalism (percent). Note: Respondents that never consume cultural journalism (15 percent, n = 270) have been excluded. The number of respondents (n) that answered each question above varied between 1508 and 1521. Percentages are rounded.

This suggests that there is indeed a connection between the 'transnationalism' of cultural journalism content and what people want from the content (Roosvall and Widholm 2018). The same applies to the political dimension since 58 percent consider cultural journalism a very or fairly important source of information for keeping up with societal debate. The ways people value different areas of coverage tend, however, to vary depending on the intensity of consumption and background variables.

Table 2 below presents a balanced measure of how consumers of different social groups have responded to the question. We have excluded the avoiders since they have more limited experiences from (recent) cultural journalism consumption.

Table 2. Motives to consume cultural journalism across demographic factors (balance measure).

	Outside World	Societal Debate	Music, Film, Books	Fashion/Lifestyle
Age				
16–29	26.7	11.8	8.3	−23.3
30–49	23.4	8.7	1.5	−36.3
50–64	39.9	29.9	10.5	−39.4
65–85	58.2	44	16.1	−29
Sig	***	***	**	
Gender				
Women	47.3	35.4	21.8	−11.6
Men	28.3	13.2	−5.6	−58.1
Sig	***	***	***	***
Education				
Low	38.6	9	−16.3	−47.1
Middle	37.8	20	−2.9	−35.7
Middle high	35.3	31.4	8.9	−29.1
High	41.8	30.8	27.8	−29.6
Sig		*	***	*
Geography				
Countryside	34.7	24.9	−8.4	−46.5
Small towns	38	22.1	3.2	−36.3
Medium size towns	36.3	21.1	7.5	−31.1
Big cities	45.4	41.3	31.4	−28
Sig		**	**	
Left–right preference				
Clearly to the left	52.3	52	30.2	−42.8
Somewhat to the left	43.6	32.1	19.9	−37.3
Neither left nor right	37.4	15.9	5.7	−25.8
Somewhat to the right	35.1	22.9	2.3	−32.7
Clearly to the right	15.4	6.4	−15.5	−39.7
Sig	*	***	***	
Intensity of consumption				
High	77.5	72.5	81.9	0
Moderate	30.3	15.4	−5.8	−40.1
Sig	***	***	***	***
Total	38	25.4	8.5	−33.8

Note: Respondents that never consume cultural journalism (15 percent, n = 270) are excluded. The number of respondents (n) that answered each question above varied between 1508 and 1521. The balance measure varies from −100 to +100. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The valuation among the consumers follows the general consumption patterns, meaning that most scores increase with the intensity of consumption and with, for example, age. It is also noteworthy that high consumers of cultural journalism consider music, film, and literature to be the most important areas of coverage (balance measure: 81.9), closely followed by the outside world (77.5) and societal debate (72.5). Moderate consumers, on the other hand, value the outside world and societal debate more, whereas the aesthetic dimension has a negative score, meaning that the majority consider it to be unimportant. Fashion and lifestyle stand out in the sense that such content has negative scores throughout, although there are some variations pertaining to age and gender.

4.2. Value Correspondence

Finally, to what extent do consumers of cultural journalism believe that their values are consistent with the values expressed by cultural journalists (RQ3)? Relatively few cultural journalism consumers (24.5 percent) answered that their values are consistent with cultural journalists' values (Table 3 below). This weak correspondence indicates a notable heterogeneity in values and opinions between consumers and journalists, which stands out in view of the stronger association between cultural journalism output and

consumers' interest in subject areas. However, when related to demographic variables, the degree of agreement with values follows general social patterns of cultural journalism consumption in that education and big city life are positively associated with a sense of having more similar cultural values to cultural journalists. Likewise, more women than men feel that their cultural values are similar to those of cultural journalists. The strongest associations concern positions on the left–right political scale, where left-leaning people were more affirmative in their responses to the value statement compared to right-leaning people. Between the ends of the ideological spectrum, the difference is as much as 31.6 percentage points.

Table 3. Attitudes toward perceived values of cultural journalists by demographic factors (percent).

	Affirmative	Rejective	No Opinion	Sum	Balance Measure	n
Age **						
16–29	30.4	31.3	38.3	100	−0.9	214
30–49	25.2	39.2	35.7	100	−14	457
50–64	23.1	49.0	27.9	100	−25.9	402
65–85	24.8	45.1	30.1	100	−20.3	435
Gender ***						
Women	28.6	35.0	36.5	100	−6.4	798
Men	21.5	50.7	27.7	100	−29.2	710
Education ***						
Low	17.3	46.9	35.8	100	−29.6	162
Middle	17.5	46.4	36.1	100	−28.9	446
Middle high	28.4	40.0	31.6	100	−11.6	380
High	32.3	39.6	28.0	100	−7.3	492
Geography **						
Countryside	19.3	48.6	32.1	100	−29.3	212
Small towns	18.1	50.4	31.5	100	−32.3	276
Medium size towns	27.3	39.8	32.9	100	−12.5	729
Big cities	31.6	37.9	30.4	100	−6.3	253
Left–right preference ***						
Clearly to the left	42.1	30.4	27.5	100	11.7	171
Somewhat to the left	34.7	30.3	35.0	100	4.4	340
Neither left nor right	20.9	43.4	35.7	100	−22.5	454
Somewhat to the right	19.0	50.8	30.2	100	−31.8	378
Clearly to the right	10.5	62.9	26.6	100	−52.4	143
Intensity of consumption ***						
High	49.0	36.9	14.1	100	12.1	256
Moderate	19.6	47.5	33.0	100	−27.9	1252
Total	24.5	45.7	29.8	100	−21.2	1508

Note: The table displays the percentage share that answered affirmative (completely correct and fairly correct) or rejective (fairly incorrect, completely incorrect) to the value statement. The balance measure varies from −100 to +100. Respondents that never consume cultural journalism (n = 270) are excluded. The total number of respondents that answered each question varied between 1470 and 1534. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

People aged 16–29 are more prone to identify with the values of cultural journalists compared to other age groups despite high consumption in this group being significantly lower. This is paradoxical, given the large differences we identified regarding the importance of different areas of cultural journalism, where neither political nor aesthetic areas seemed to motivate the youngest age group to consume cultural journalism. Ultimately, while certain groups agree more than others with the values expressed in cultural journalism output, heterogeneity signifies the value relationship between cultural journalism output and cultural journalism users overall, which we in the next section will discuss in relation to democracy and public sphere theory.

5. Discussion

Cultural journalism constitutes an important part of public communication and argumentation, not least through the way it connects the so-called political and cultural parts of the public sphere. Almost half of the population in Sweden consumes cultural journalism on a weekly basis. Daily consumption is relatively low compared to traditional news consumption, but this is to be expected from a subfield of journalism that historically has not been dependent on immediacy and instant consumption (Knapskog and Larsen 2008; Sarrimo 2017; Kristensen and Riegert 2017). While previous studies of content point to tendencies toward convergence between traditional news and cultural journalism, differences prevail.

Our study shows that age, education, geography, and political identification correlate with high consumption of cultural journalism, and ultimately, cultural journalism therefore misses some groups. We also find that high consumption is strongest among older people, people with high education, people living in big cities, and left-leaning people. Citizens who tend to avoid cultural journalism are conversely relatively often young people, have less education, live in the countryside, and are politically right-leaning. While the gaps between some of these groups and cultural journalism consumption may eventually be closing through cultural desks' strategies of approaching broader audiences, cultural desks are also still trying to cater to niche audiences through publishing on themes that would have a hard time surviving in a completely commercialized environment. Both of these approaches— reaching out to broader audiences and catering to niche audiences that would not be included in a completely commercialized news media logic—are important democratic endeavors. Hence, the following discussion on how cultural journalism contributes to democracy and the public sphere(s) should be read with a view to the fact that it lacks direct connections to some groups in society, with simultaneous acknowledgment of the fact that if it did reach everyone, it would not be able to fulfill its perceived unique role in a media landscape otherwise dominated by hard news.

The estimated importance of subjects of cultural journalism as rated by its consumers shows that music, film, literature, etc., are actually less important to its consumers in general than societal debate and the world outside of Sweden. This interest in coverage of the world outside of Sweden seems to go hand in hand with the fact that cultural journalism output is distinguished by an unusually transnational outlook on the world (Roosvall and Widholm 2018). It is also noteworthy that the salience attributed to cultural opinion material by editors and the success of such material regarding clicks and shares (see Riegert et al. 2015) coincides with the fact that societal debate for many motivates cultural journalism consumption. Thus, the societal–cultural debate holds significant importance within the larger public sphere, not only in terms of its output but also because it attracts consumers who may not necessarily agree with the expressed values. The (dis)connections between the respondents' values and opinions and those expressed in cultural journalism correspond to the ideal goals of the heterogeneous, respectfully conflictual democratic approach of agonistic democracy theory (Mouffe 2013). This is implicated by the fact that respondents generally reported a low degree of alignment between their values and those of the journalists, yet they still consume this journalism and consider its coverage of arts, popular culture, societal issues, and worldview debates to be important. Cultural journalism thus contributes crucially to democracy and public sphere deliberation, connecting to agonistic ideals. It does this by not eschewing a continuous conflict of ideas rather than striving for a final consensus around the 'best' ideas. Content analyses from previous studies further suggest that it does so by bringing multifaceted, i.e., heterogeneous, perspectives and reference points into the debate. Nonetheless, a closer look at the value dimension of cultural journalism consumption revealed significant variations. Users with left-leaning values agreed more with what they perceive as cultural journalists' values. So, while there is heterogeneity regarding values in general, this is partly relative to the traditional left–right scale. An important backdrop here might be that trust in journalism in general is much lower among Swedes with right-leaning values (Andersson 2019a),

which means they may be less likely to agree with any journalistic output, regardless of political leaning decipherable in the content. This points to a need for further examination of whether the lack of value correspondence is, as a whole, agonistic or if it could also, in part, be antagonistic.

How is this relative heterogeneity situated within the public sphere, or alternatively, in relation to more limited domain-specific publics or public spherules? The understanding of public spherules as social fragments that lack critical mass but share many characteristics of the traditionally conceived public sphere could be relevant for the loosely organized group of people who consume cultural journalism. However, their varied reasons for engaging with this content do not align with the motivations typically associated with spherules where individuals gather around a specific cause, such as environmentalism or feminism. Additionally, these consumers do not constitute a temporal issue public, as there is no single issue unifying their engagement. We therefore argue that the specificity of cultural journalism consumption suggests it is linked to a domain-specific public sphere. The high value placed on societal debate and global coverage by those consuming cultural journalism indicates that it provides important and unique perspectives. These perspectives are also covered by other types of journalism, but those consuming cultural journalism are particularly seeking them in cultural journalism and find them through its distinct frames of reference. This points to the importance of a domain from the consumers' point of view, a domain centered on communication and debate on culture in a broad sense, including political–societal aspects. The high numbers for coverage of 'the world outside of Sweden' as something that motivates consumption of cultural journalism furthermore reveals that the unique transnational character of cultural journalism content (Roosvall and Widholm 2018) really matters to its consumers and that cultural journalism could thus be important for the burgeoning constitution of transnational public spheres (Fraser 2008).

In light of the above discussion of our results, paired with results from previous research on both content transformations and professional ideals among cultural editors (Riegert et al. 2022), we suggest that, even though cultural journalism does not reach the whole of the national public, it contributes to a multifaceted public sphere in Sweden. Cultural journalism offers respectful yet conflictual approaches, transnational perspectives, and cultural–societal debate. It achieves this through its significant contribution to a domain-specific public sphere, which, by definition, does not reach everyone but which, at the same time, through the scope of content, stretches out across national borders and creates a bridge to the rest of the world. This domain-specific, limited, and extended public sphere can be characterized not as a cultural one, nor as one consisting of a cultural and a political half, but as an integrated cultural–political one. The fact that people turn to cultural journalism for both societal debate and content on the arts, combined with the importance of societal debate appearing, for example, on newspaper pages alongside—rather than separate from—more traditional cultural content, indicates the existence of such a sphere. Such a sphere is ultimately connective, even though not all citizens are connected. In this sense, our results contribute to a broader understanding of the political and the cultural, and about the political and everyday life in communication and society. Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) argue that journalists play important roles in both political and everyday life, identifying several roles within each domain. In light of our results, we contend that political and everyday life are not easily separated and that the same applies to the cultural and political aspects of public spheres.

Although the consumption of cultural journalism is more limited compared to traditional news, our findings suggest that scholars interested in media, democracy, and the public sphere should pay greater attention to content and consumption beyond explicitly political journalism and hard news (Penney 2022). Recognizing the interplay between cultural and political news journalism can provide a more comprehensive understanding of media influence on public discourse. Future research should therefore explore how

cultural journalism contributes to shaping public perceptions and democratic engagement in comparison with traditional news.

This study examined the Swedish media landscape, characterized by a historically robust newspaper market, high levels of news consumption across diverse demographic groups, and well-funded public service broadcasters. Within this system, cultural journalism has maintained a relatively prominent role, serving as both a forum for public debate and a platform for aesthetic coverage. However, the ongoing economic crisis in journalism is prompting swift and significant changes (Widholm et al. 2021). Cultural desks, particularly in local newspapers, have been closed, and public service broadcasters face the prospect of diminishing resources in the long term. The implications of these developments warrant further investigation. Moreover, there is a need for comparative studies incorporating multiple national contexts, particularly beyond the Nordic region.

References

Andersson, Ulrika. 2019a. Högt Förtroende för Nyhetsmedier—Men Under Ytan Råder Stormvarning [Extensive Trust in News Media—But Under The Surface: Storm Warning]. In *Storm och Stiltje [Storm and Calm]*. Edited by Ulrika Andersson, Björn Rönnerstrand, Patrik Öhberg and Annika Bergström. Gothenburg: The SOM-Institute, pp. 65–80.

Andersson, Ulrika. 2019b. Stort samhällsengagemang spelar roll för nyhetsvanorna—Särskilt bland unga [Strong civic engagement matters for news habits—Especially among young people]. In *Storm och Stiltje [Storm and Calm]*. Edited by Ulrika Andersson, Björn Rönnerstrand, Patrik Öhberg and Annika Bergström. Gothenburg: The SOM-Institute, pp. 65–80.

Bergström, Annika. 2023. Internet perceptions among older adults in Sweden. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5: 1250008. [CrossRef]

Bjereld, Ulf, and Marie Demker. 2020. *Individualism och nationalism i pandemins tid*. SOM-undersökningen om coronaviruset", Rapport, 12. Gothenburg: The SOM-Institute.

Bruns, Axel. 2019. Digital Public Spheres in Australia. In *Digitizing Democracy*. Edited by Aljosha Karim Schapals, Axel Bruns and Brian McNair. New York: Routledge, pp. 133–46.

Chambers, Samuel A. 2001. Language and Politics. Agonistic discourse in The West Wing. *CTheory*. Available online: https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14591/5443 (accessed on 26 February 2014).

Cunningham, Stuart. 2001. Popular Media as Public "Sphericules" for Diasporic Communities. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4: 131–47. [CrossRef]

Dahlgren, Peter. 2009. *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Esser, Frank, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes de Vreese. 2012. Reviewing Key Concepts in Research on Political News Journalism: Conceptualizations, Operationalizations, and Propositions for Future Research. *Journalism* 13: 139–43. [CrossRef]

Fraser, Nancy. 2008. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge: Polity.

Gitlin, Todd. 1998. Public Sphere or Public Sphericules? In *Media, Ritual and Identity*. Edited by James Curran and Tamar Liebews. London: Routledge, pp. 168–74.

Gripsrud, Jostein. 2017. The Cultural, the Political and the Functions of Cultural Journalism in Digital times. In *Cultural Journalism in the Nordic Countries*. Edited by Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Kristina Riegert. Gothenburg: Nordicom, pp. 181–94.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press. First published 1962.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2006. Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research. *Communication Theory* 16: 11–26. [CrossRef]

Hanitzsch, Thomas, and Tim Vos. 2018. Journalism beyond democracy: A New Look into Journalistic Roles in Political and Everyday Life. *Journalism* 19: 146–64. [CrossRef]

Hellman, Heikki, and Maarit Jaakkola. 2012. From Aesthetes to Reporters: The paradigm Shift in Arts Journalism in Finland. *Journalism* 13: 783–801. [CrossRef]

Jaakkola, Maarit. 2015. *The Contested Autonomy of Arts and Journalism: Change and Continuity of the Dualistic Professionalism of Cultural Journalism*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Jacobs, Ronald N. 2012. Entertainment Media and the Aesthetic Public Sphere. In *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ronald N. Jacobs and Philip Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 318–42.

Janssen, Susanne, Giselinde Kuipers, and Marc Verboord. 2008. Cultural globalization and arts journalism: The international orientation of arts and culture coverage in Dutch, French, German, and US newspapers, 1955 to 2005. *American Sociological Review* 73: 719–40. [CrossRef]

Jansson, Daniel, Frida Tipple, and Marcus Weissenbilder. 2018. *SOM-Undersökningarna 2017—En Metodöversikt*. Gothenburg: The SOM-institute, University of Gothenburg.

Kammer, Aske. 2015. Post-industrial Cultural Criticism: The Everyday Amateur Expert and the Online Cultural Public Sphere. *Journalism Practice* 9: 872–89. [CrossRef]

Knapskog, Karl, and Leif Ove Larsen. 2008. *Kulturjournalistikk. Pressen og den kulturelle Offentlighed [Cultural Journalism. The Press and the Cultural Public Sphere]*. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press.

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard. 2019. Cultural Journalism—Journalism About Culture. *Sociology Compass* 13: e12701. [CrossRef]

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard, and Anna Roosvall. 2017. Editorial and Cultural Debates in Danish and Swedish Newspapers: Understanding the Terror Attacks in Paris and Copenhagen in Early 2015. In *Cultural Journalism in the Nordic Countries*. Edited by Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Kristina Riegert. Gotherburg: Nordicom, pp. 135–57.

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard, and Anna Roosvall. 2021. Cultural communication as political communication. In *Power, Communication, and Politics in the Nordic Countries*. Edited by Eli Skogerbø, Øyvind Ihlen, Nete Nörgaard Kristensen and Lars Nord. Gothenburg: Nordicom, pp. 177–96.

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard, and Kristina Riegert. 2017. Why Cultural Journalism in the Nordic countries? In *Cultural Journalism in the Nordic Countries*. Edited by Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Kristina Riegert. Gothenburg: Nordicom, pp. 9–26.

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard, and Unni From. 2012. Lifestyle Journalism: Blurring Boundaries. *Journalism Practice* 6: 26–41. [CrossRef]

Kristensen, Nete Nørgaard, and Unni From. 2015. From Ivory Tower to Cross-Media Personas: The Heterogeneous Cultural Critic in the Media. *Journalism Practice* 9: 853–71. [CrossRef]

Larsen, Leif Ove, and Vilde Ellingsberg. 2024. Den usynlige kulturjournalistikken: Redaksjonelle prioriteringer og tekstlige reorienteringer i det digitale medielandskapet. *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 31: 1–21. [CrossRef]

Lauronen, Tina, Riie Heikkilä, and Semi Purhonen. 2019. Cultural globalization on the printed page: Stability and change in the proportion of foreign cultural products in European quality newspapers, 1960–2010. *Acta Sociologica* 62: 211–27. [CrossRef]

Lindell, Johan, and Jan Fredrik Hovden. 2018. Distinctions in the Media Welfare State: Audience fragmentation in Post-egalitarian Sweden. *Media, Culture and Society* 40: 639–55. [CrossRef]

Moe, Halvar. 2008. Dissemination and dialogue in the public sphere: A case for public service media online. *Media, Culture & Society* 3: 319–36.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Penney, Joel. 2022. *Pop Culture, Politics, and the News: Entertainment Journalism in the Polarized Media Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Poindexter, Paula, and Dustin Harp. 2010. The Softer Side of News. In *Women, Men and News*. Edited by Paula Poindexter, Sharon Meraz and Amy Schmitz Weiss. London: Routledge, pp. 107–19.

Riegert, Kristina, and Andreas Widholm. 2019. The Difference Culture Makes. *Nordicom Review* 40: 3–18. [CrossRef]

Riegert, Kristina, and Jan Fredrik Hovden. 2019. Identity, Empathy and Argument: Immigrants in Culture and Entertainment Journalism in the Scandinavian Press. *Javnost-The Public* 26: 158–76. [CrossRef]

Riegert, Kristina, Anna Roosvall, and Andreas Widholm. 2015. The political in cultural journalism: Fragmented interpretative communities in the digital age. *Journalism Practice* 9: 773–90. [CrossRef]

Riegert, Kristina, Anna Roosvall, and Andreas Widholm. 2018. Cultural journalism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Riegert, Kristina, Anna Roosvall, and Andreas Widholm. 2022. *Kulturjournalistikens världar [The Worlds of Cultural Journalism]*. Lund: Norcic Academic Press.

Roosvall, Anna, and Andreas Widholm. 2018. The transnationalism of cultural journalism in Sweden: Outlooks and introspection in the global era. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 21.

Sarrimo, Cristine. 2017. The press crisis and its impact on Swedish arts journalism: Autonomy loss, a shifting paradigm and a 'journalistification' of the profession. *Journalism* 18: 664–79. [CrossRef]

Strömbäck, Jesper. 2005. In Search of a Standard: Four Models of Democracy and their Normative Implications for Journalism. *Journalism Studies* 6: 331–45. [CrossRef]

Tyndall, Andrew. 2004. The dailies: Old formats, New Challenges. In *Reporting the Arts II: News Coverage of Arts and Culture in America*. Edited by Andras Szántó, Daniel S. Levy and Andrew Tyndall. New York: National Arts Journalism Program (NAJP), pp. 24–35.

Wadbring, Ingela. 2016. Om Dem Som Tar Del av Nyheter i Lägre Utsträckning än Andra [On Those Who Take Part of News to a Less Extent Than Others]. In *Människorna, Medierna och Marknaden. Medieutredningens Forskningsantologi om Demokrati i Förändring [People, Media and the Market]*. Edited by Oscar Westlund. Stockholm: Wolters Kluwers, pp. 463–86.

Wessler, Hartmund. 2018. *Habermas and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity.

Widholm, Andreas. 2019. Transnational news consumption and digital content mobility: Insights from Sweden. *Journalism Studies* 20: 1472–90. [CrossRef]

Widholm, Andreas, Kristina Riegert, and Anna Roosvall. 2021. Abundance or crisis? Transformations in the media ecology of Swedish cultural journalism over four decades. *Journalism* 22: 1413–30. [CrossRef]