

## FOREWORD

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In the course of the nineteenth century, the public sphere and freedom of expression featured prominently in political and cultural discourses in Northern Europe. Defined as the space where public opinion takes shape, the public sphere develops as a concept across Europe around the 1810s alongside discussions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press centering on the extent to which the press's and the individual's ability to spread information and express new ideas should be guaranteed by law (Hemstad and Michalsen 2019: 16). More recent debates following cases such as the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005, the Charlie Hebdo case in 2011 and subsequent reactions following the shooting in 2015, the highly contentious publications by Milo Yiannopoulos and the spreading of concepts such as 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', are only a handful of well-known examples demonstrating how these two topics continue to be of interest and relevance today. This special issue entitled *The Public Sphere and Freedom of Expression in Northern Europe 1814–1914* discusses the origin and development of these important fields focusing on their formative period, while placing debates around them within a broader socio-cultural context and emphasising the importance of transnational and comparative approaches.

The Nordic countries have traditionally been regarded as pioneers in the historical development of freedom of expression. In 2016, Sweden and Finland celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world's first

freedom of the press act, passed in 1766. In 2020, Denmark followed suit, celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world's first (and hitherto the only one of its kind) freedom of the press act without any kind of restrictions, passed in 1770. While both milestones are clearly worth celebrating, it is important to note that the progressive freedoms granted by these two acts did not last for long. The history of the consolidation of the public sphere and freedom of expression is one of gradual and uneven development, through conflicts, setbacks and battles, until the achievement of gradually broader public participation towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Nordic countries of today are, together with the Low Countries, consistently ranked at the top of the World Press Freedom Index. This is, however, not the case with Great Britain, which in 2019 was ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> (out of 180 countries) (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>). This appears to indicate a reverse development considering that, in nineteenth-century debates on freedom of the press, Great Britain was seen as a model, a beacon of freedom of expression.

Studying the development in the Nordic countries, the British Isles and the Low Countries through a transnational and comparative approach, this issue aims to shed new light on the expansion of the public sphere and freedom of expression, as well as on related national, political and cultural changes in the nineteenth century. The nine articles featured here cover a broad range of topics, engaging with legal, intellectual, emotional, military, social and cultural history and addressing questions around individual and collective rights, nation- and region-building, the development of civil society, education and cultural heritage.

The contributions in this issue are based on conference proceedings from the conference 'The Public Sphere and Freedom of Expression: Britain and the Nordic Countries, 1815–1900', held at UCL in London in June 2018. The event was a collaboration between the Department of Scandinavian Studies at UCL and the research project 'The Public Sphere and Freedom of Expression in the Nordic Countries 1815–1900' at the University of Oslo. This interdisciplinary research group is part of UiO:Nordic, one of three main strategic research initiatives at the University of Oslo (2016–2022). Its aim is to provide new knowledge

on the Nordic countries' different paths to freedom of expression and a free and open public sphere, and to explore Nordic differences and interactions in the nineteenth century from an international perspective and in a transnational context. This themed issue of *Scandinavica* is a clear example of this. The Anglo-Nordic relations covered in its studies are of specific interest, considering that Britain played, as mentioned above, a major role as model in debates on freedom of expression and the public sphere and was considered an important political actor with strategic, geopolitical, and, to a certain degree, cultural interests in the Nordic area. Whereas the relation between Great Britain and the smaller countries in the North is one of asymmetry throughout the nineteenth century, the Low Countries, discussed particularly in the article by Ruth Hemstad, represent a comparable entity in terms of size and international influence.

The first section of this issue, consisting of three articles, examines the main trends and developments within the field of freedom of expression in the Nordic countries and the UK in the nineteenth century.

Lars Björne's article on the theory and practice of freedom of expression in the Nordic countries from 1815 to 1914 (translated by Ian Giles) is based on his seminal monograph from 2018, *Frihetens gränser: Yttrandefriheten i Norden 1814-1915* (Freedom's Borders: Freedom of Expression in the Nordic Countries 1814-1915). This is the first comprehensive discussion on legal regulations, theoretical debates and court practices regarding freedom of the press in the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland) in the nineteenth century. Björne underlines the enduring role that the Danish autocracy's regulation on the boundaries of freedom of the press from 1799 played in the Nordic countries. In spite of the absence of advance censorship and the right of the author and publisher to have their case tried before a court – secured in the 1799 regulation – freedom of expression was often under threat as those in power did not support the opposition's right to express dissenting views. Whereas freedom of expression was constitutionally protected in the Scandinavian countries during the nineteenth century, the English tradition, discussed by Eric Barendt, is somehow different. He emphasizes that a study of freedom

of expression (or freedom of the press or of discussion, as it was known at the time) in nineteenth-century England has to focus on the various restrictions imposed on the exercise of this freedom, rather than on the scope of the freedom itself. Barendt looks at freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of speech in view of contemporary libel laws and concludes that in the UK the protection of this freedom is weak in principle but robust in practice. Philip Schofield's article expands on this point by contributing with central theoretical reflections on freedom of expression and the public sphere in his study of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and his writings on the ideas of freedom of the press, public opinion, and good government. Some of these works were translated into Swedish and Danish/Norwegian. Schofield demonstrates how Bentham, throughout his career, placed great emphasis on public opinion as a bulwark against oppression and misrule, and strongly recommended liberty of the press and liberty of public associations in order to secure good government.

In the second section, two comparative articles focus on Northern European united kingdoms in the nineteenth century in relation to the development of the public sphere, civil society and nation-building. Union states and united kingdoms, such as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1801–1922), the United Kingdoms of Norway and Sweden (1814–1905) and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–1830), are examples of new state constructions experiencing national forces and ideas, which gained ground in the European Restoration – a transitional period in European history. In his article, Alvin Jackson compares the British-Scottish-Irish and the Swedish-Norwegian union states and discusses the role of civil society and national symbolism in the endurance of this kind of state construction. Civil society and the press could support, but also undermine, the union. In her study, Ruth Hemstad compares the United Kingdoms of Norway and Sweden and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands – both constructed in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars – as a loose personal union and a unitary state, respectively. She discusses politics of unification and amalgamation in order to blend two different national groups as well as the national reactions against this kind of politics, especially on behalf of the non-dominant partner.

The two articles in the third section discuss different aspects of international politics and the role of more or less publicly expressed feelings and emotions, focusing, respectively, on the transnational relations between Britain and Norway, and between Sweden and the former Eastern part of the Swedish Realm, Finland. Roald Berg discusses the relationship between Norway and Britain inspired by recent research on the role of emotions, and examines the history of Norwegian *distrust* of Britain – a distrust that lived alongside the allegedly trusting belief in the ‘British guarantee’ of Norway. In the following contribution, Mart Kuldkepp argues that the persistent revanchist feelings in Sweden vis-à-vis Russia over the loss of Finland in 1809 constitute an undercurrent in Sweden’s otherwise peaceful modern history. The ‘Finnish Question’ in Sweden, frequently debated in Swedish liberal press during the Crimean War against Russia (1853–1856), reflected feelings of national humiliation over the defeat in 1809 as well as anxieties over the development of Fennoman nationalism and the possibilities presented by the Scandinavianist movement.

The last two articles focus on education, culture and the public sphere, seen from a transnational British-Scandinavian perspective. Merethe Roos’s study of the British press and the great interest in the Norwegian and Swedish contributions at the educational exhibition in London in 1854 concludes that that the rising British interest in Scandinavia as a tourist destination, as a utopia of the North, played a role in stimulating a general interest in Scandinavian issues. Finally, Elettra Carbone looks closer at the idea of the ‘Cheerful Danes’ seen from the perspective of the British scholar and traveller Henry Clarke Barlow (1806–1876), whose unpublished writings have long been stored in UCL Special Collections. His travelling to and writing on Copenhagen – a rather untypical Scandinavian tourist destination at the time – are representative of an alternative North, one where culture and education are prime sources of happiness.

By discussing the origin and development of freedom of expression and the public sphere and demonstrating how these pivotal processes are intertwined with questions of nation-building, international relations and provision of culture and information, this themed issue contributes to our historical understanding of freedom and public

participation in Northern Europe throughout the nineteenth century while stressing the importance of scholarly approaches that transgress national boundaries and limitations.

## References

Hemstad, R. and Michalsen, D. (eds.) (2019). *Frie ord i Norden? Medborgerskap, offentlighet og ytringsfrihet, nordiske erfaringer 1814–1914*. Oslo: Pax.