





Special Issue Introduction: Boundary Spanning in the Age of Collaborative Governance – Insights From Nordic Local Governments

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Introduction

The overall theme of this special issue is boundary spanning in the age of collaborative governance in a Nordic local government context. Inter-organizational collaboration and coordinative and cross-boundary work have become increasingly important to service provision in Nordic local governments. In recent years, we have observed an increased demand for the provision of integrated services and co-production in public services. This entails that public employee and their organizations, more than ever, are expected to work as boundary spanners across policy domains and formal organizational boundaries within, between, and beyond local government organizations (Ansell and Gash 2008; Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Williams 2012; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018a, 2018b, 2021). However, collaboration entails both promises and pitfalls for public sector reforms (Lodge 2013) and those involved in realizing the collaborative agenda by working across and between organizational and sectorial boundaries. Consequently, calls for research on boundary spanners and their activities (boundary spanning) have come to the fore. This need is partly reflected in recent research that examines boundary spanning in a Nordic context within various policy domains, including crisis management in Sweden (Alvinus and Larsson 2018), regional business development in Denmark (Knorr 2020), social and labor market services in Norway (Bakken and van der Wel 2023), urban development and renewal in Norway (Hovik and Stigen 2023), and skill formation and supply in Denmark (Klindt et al. 2023). Impressions from this body of research suggest that boundary spanning is chaotic, difficult to realize, psychological burdensome, and highly institutionally and structurally dependent. These impressions somehow contrast the hopes and promises raised by the agenda of collaborative governance and cross-boundary work for addressing contemporary challenges in society.

In this special issue, we further examine the importance of boundary spanners and boundary spanning in the Nordic context. First, we provide a short description of the Nordic local government context. Second, we introduce key parts of the literature on boundary spanning and highlight its importance in the age of collaborative governance. Third, we introduce and discuss the five contributions to this special issue before drawing up final remarks.

The Nordic Context

Nordic local governments generally operate within the context of affluent and economically well-developed countries renowned for their large welfare states

characterized by principles of inclusiveness and universalism (Rothstein 1998). Furthermore, the local government sectors are large, tax-financed, relatively autonomous, and charged with responsibilities for multiple services (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004; Stoker 2011). There is also a trend of increased devolution of tasks from state to local government, with local implementation based on mandatory collaboration (Torjesen and Vabo 2014; Torjesen et al. 2017). Thus, boundary spanners increasingly operate at the interface of contradictory local and state objectives and policies. International benchmarks also show that the Nordic countries are at the global forefront concerning the digital transformation of society and public services (see, e.g., EC 2023). Digital technologies offer new opportunities for the sharing and use of information within and across organizational boundaries and may imply a new and unique set of challenges and possibilities for boundary spanning (Gram 2024).

De la Porte et al. (2023b) ask whether the model of the Nordic countries, as a “celebrated region” due to their unique and historically well-performing institutional, regulatory, and governance features, can come to grips with the grand contemporary challenges and serve as a beacon for other countries to follow. De la Porte et al. (2023b) note that the key features that enable Nordic countries to deal with wicked issues include an inclusive governance style with widespread stakeholder involvement and a versatility and willingness to try out new solutions in how challenges are tackled. The literature on comparative public administration provides further details that shed light on the features of the Nordic administrative profile (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019). As comparisons reveal, the profile’s key characteristics largely correspond to a neo-Weberian state ideal-type model that includes the rule of law, a unitary-decentralized political-administrative structure with strong local governments, an open and transparent administrative culture with high degrees of accessibility and freedom of information for citizens, high levels of citizen participation and user involvement, and strong civic self-organization (Byrkjeflot et al. 2021). The Nordic municipalities – the lower tier of the local government systems – are furthermore multipurpose and enjoy comparatively high levels of autonomy, including the right to collect taxes, set service levels, and organize service delivery (Baldersheim et al. 2017). Among the key municipal service areas are primary education, childcare, eldercare, public health, urban planning, environmental protection, utilities, waste management, unemployment services, local economic development, and culture and sports. However, territorial and demographic structures vary substantially across the Nordic countries, creating very different conditions and competencies for intermunicipal collaboration and boundary spanning. Due to the outlined institutional and performatory features, we believe that the Nordic local governments are of special interest to research addressing the importance of boundary spanning both within and across local governments in the age of collaborative governance.

Boundary Spanning in the Age of Collaborative Governance

It may be said that today, we live in an age partially defined by the idea that collaborative governance and boundary spanning may solve many of society’s contemporary grand challenges. Ansell and Gash (2007) outline two interrelated ways in which the emergence of collaborative governance and boundary spanning can be viewed. First, the emergence of “a whole-of-government approach” can be viewed as a response to the failures (single-purpose organizing and silo-thinking) of previous modes of governance in the wake of New Public Management reforms (Christensen and Lægreid 2007). Second, its emergence can be understood as a response to the steadily increasing specialization of knowledge and institutional complexity demanding new approaches to coordination. The importance of collaborative governance and boundary spanning is thus reinforced by a range of increasingly complex and wicked policy problems (Alford and Head 2017). In the same vein, Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2018, pp. 17–37) discuss the main driving forces that invoke boundary spanning activities in present public management, pointing to the increasing complexity of public issues, increased problems with fragmentation, and calls for citizen engagement and co-production as the major drivers.

However, given the different drivers and contexts for collaborative governance, boundary spanners and boundary spanning can be viewed from several perspectives. Meerkerk and

Edelenbos (2018a) offer one authoritative point of departure for characterizing boundary spanners and their activities:

People who pro-actively scan the organizational environment, employ activities to collect information and to gain support across organizational or institutional boundaries, disseminate information and coordinate activities between their “home” organization or organizational unit and its environment, and connect processes and actors across these boundaries (van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018a, p. 3).

Based on this definition, most public managers and professionals can, in some respects, be regarded as boundary spanners (Williams 2013). Thus, the scope and phenomenon of boundary spanning can be wide-ranging and multifaceted. Individuals can act as boundary spanners, but boundary spanning can also be a universal mechanism in an organization (Marrone et al. 2007). In principle, all members in an organization can enact boundary spanning roles and conduct boundary spanning functions without necessarily being expressly identified with such roles and functions (Stadler and Van Wassenhove 2016; Tang et al. 2018). In addition, through the lens of actor-network theory any entity, both human or nonhuman, can be regarded as actors and conduct boundary spanning (Latour 2005; Crawford 2020). Based on this broader scope, we suggest a typology for boundary spanning emphasizing three different perspectives, which aligns with the contributions and empirical variations presented in this special issue.

A Structuralist and open organizational perspective on boundary spanning: According to van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2018) such a structuralist, or open system approach on boundary spanning, has its origin in contingency theory from the 1960s (Thompson 2017; Mintzberg 1989). In this classic environmental structural approach, the lens is tuned at organizational macro and meso-level. Focus is on “strategic boundary spanning” to design the organizational structure aligned to handle potential uncertainties (contingencies, hence: contingency theory) in the organizational environment (van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018). According to this structuralist and open environmental perspective, special organizational units, teams, project groups, liaison positions/units etc., are assigned the function of adapting, aligning, and shielding the organization for potential and various contingencies.

Individual Boundary Spanners – an action perspective: These type of boundary spanners are individuals – whose role is to interact with external entities, bridging the gap between internal entities in an organization, as well as the organization itself, and its external environment. Boundary spanners can be employees, managers, or distinguished representatives who execute boundary-spanning functions and roles (Williams 2012). According to an individual action perspective, emphasis is placed on studying agency, but structural conditions are not overlooked. Rather, it is the reflexivity between structure and agency that is studied. Boundary spanning is not only determined passively by features of the organization’s environment. Individual agency and thus, individual characteristics can be of great importance in exercising the role as a boundary spanner. (See e.g., the typology developed by Williams (2012) and Ancona and Caldwell (1992) as examples of various roles and functions and personal characteristics boundary spanners can – and potentially, “should” conduct).

Boundary objects: artefacts, technology, and various tools can also act as boundary spanners. The knowledge and studies about boundary objects origins from the actor-network theory developed in the 1980s. (See e.g. Latour 2005). This novel social science tradition provides a groundbreaking approach to interpret socio-technical relations. Boundary objects, i.e. materials, artefacts, technology, e-mail systems, social media platforms, internet meeting platforms, and online health record platforms (Gram 2024). These boundary object can thus be interpreted as actors (boundary spanners) who form part of relationships between human actors in collaborative processes and by their capacity to serve as bridges between intersecting social and cultural worlds (Carlie 2002; Star and Griesemer 1989). In this way, boundary objects are defined by their capacity to serve as bridges between intersecting social and cultural worlds and to create conditions for collaboration (Nicolini et al. 2012).

The five original contributions in this special issue can, in many respects, be regarded as examples of how the three different types of boundary spanning take place in response to the different driving forces.

The Studies in This Special Issue

In Table 1, we provide an overview of the five contributions and their key findings, the type of boundary spanner addressed, and the driving forces involved. Below, we review and discuss the main characteristics and findings of the five contributions.

Table 1. Contributions: An overview

Author(s)	Title (abbreviated)	Country	Policy domain	Research design	Key findings	Type of boundary spanner	Drivers for Boundary spanning
Gram Bang	Trust and Objects: Trust-Building Capacities of Digital Objects in Inter-Organizational Collaboration	Denmark	Public health, primary and secondary care (telemedicine)	Qualitative / single case-study	Demonstrates trust as a dimension of digital objects, since such objects function as boundary spanners, connecting, mediating and building trust and distrust among actors.	Objects, artifacts	Increased complexity
Klausen	Crisis Management as Strategic Coping	Denmark	Crisis management in multiple policy domains Local government and state	Qualitative / Multiple case-study	Demonstrates bureaucracies rather than new public governance measures as key for local coping strategies and indeed capable of adjusting to changing environments in crisis management	Coordination by hierarchy, boundary spanner redundant	Increased complexity Wicked issues
Kiland et al.	Conditions for Managerial Boundary Spanning in Local Public Health Policymaking (Cross boundary imperative)	Norway	Public health (local cross-sectorial health coordination) Local government	Quantitative / cross-sectional survey data	Demonstrates that boundary spanning is determined by contextual, structural, and organizational conditions – including anchoring public health issues at the administrative apex and close to chief medical officer. In addition, municipal size and sufficient professional expertise seems to be decisive regarding successful public health planning	Open organizational boundary spanning + individual action perspective	Increasing complexity Wicked issues
Högberg	Boundary Spanning in Cross-Sector Collaboration: Establishing “a Partnership of Equals” beyond the Crossroads	Sweden	Public, private, and civil society organizations	Qualitative / Single case-study	Demonstrates efficient boundary spanning as critical for cross-sector collaboration addressing complex social problems in contested contexts. Reveal the pivotal role of politicians and senior managers as active boundary spanners	Open organizational boundary spanning + individual action perspective	Complex social issues
Hoppe et al.	Intended Involvement – How Public Organizations Struggle to Become Co-producers of New Public Values	Sweden	Local government recreational services and social sustainability Increasing calls for citizens engagement and co-production	Qualitative / Multiple case-study	Public organizations appear as willing, but unable to adapt to a situation where citizens are treated as equal partners in the co-production of public values. Public organizations are tuned for steering and control, not for citizens involvement and co-production	Organizational boundary spanning Individual, action BS	Co-production and community-based initiatives

Gram (2024)

The contribution from Gram (2024) explores the dynamic between trust and digital objects in integrated health care services among patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in a Danish public health care context. The digital object, which is the focus of Gram's scrutiny, is a digital tele-home patient monitoring system applied as an information-sharing point between lung wards in hospitals, primary care, and GPs. Gram's article is groundbreaking research, since she explores how different actors can trust or distrust not only new digital technology but also the mediating and facilitating characteristics which are immanent in such technology. Boundary objects can thus affect interorganizational relations between professionals from different knowledge domains (i.e., trust/distrust regarding reliability, predictability, and competence). In this way, Gram's study reveals insights into how tele-home patient monitoring systems can function as boundary spanning mechanisms that mediate well-functioning collaboration and patient information between various health care providers, as reflected in joint problem-solving and mutual learning. However, Gram also discusses the flip side of boundary objects in integrated health care settings, as boundary objects also have the potential to create mistrust between collaborators. A situation in which cooperating actors do not see each other but are exclusively bound together through virtual boundary objects can be fertile ground for mistrust and suspiciousness regarding, for instance, the other parties' professional standards and norms.

Klausen (2024)

The contribution from Klausen (2024) addresses the limits and complementarity of collaborative governance in a case-based analysis of the governance features that have enabled the public sector in Denmark to handle four very different crises relatively successfully, including the arrival of large numbers of refugees, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the financial and economic crises of 2007 and 2009. A major takeaway is that the enactment of centralized governance and bureaucratic governance features have been key for handling successive crises. This contributes to a larger discussion of the promise of collaborative governance as a main strategy for solving certain types of complex and wicked policy issues. However, the viewpoints of the microcosmos of individual boundary spanners inform us that without the support of coordinating hierarchies and bureaucratic governance structures and processes, their efforts and attempts to address policy problems are likely to be futile. The study also demonstrates that the traditional craft skills of public administration (Rhodes 2016) and state-led administrative and regulative instruments (Ohemeng and Christensen 2022) are crucial to the successful use of collaborative governance arrangements at lower governance and implementation levels. Thus, the study also contributes to the research stream supporting a more positive view of the Nordic countries' general ability to solve problems (see, e.g., De la Porte et al. 2023a) and explains why collaborative governance and boundary spanners may or may not encounter difficulties at the local level (see, e.g., Vedeld 2022). The cases on crises and their management offered by Klausen clearly reveal that existing bureaucratic and hierarchical neo-Weberian state mechanisms are reactivated when crises arise. In contrast to arguments on the need to invoke and rely on New Public Governance, network, and boundary-spanning mechanisms in crises and turbulent times (see, e.g., Bentzen and Torfing 2023), the study by Klausen (2024) points to the conclusion that it may be better to rely on reinvented or reformed bureaucratic governance systems (Ohemeng and Christensen 2023; Olsen 2006).

Kiland et al. (2024)

The contribution from Kiland, Kvåle, and Karlsen (2024) explores the impact of organizational factors on public health coordinators' functionality and their ability to conduct boundary-spanning work and therefore successful public health planning in Norwegian local government.

The empirical quantitative material in the article is based on a web-based survey of Norwegian public health coordinators in Norwegian municipalities (n = 428, response rate 60%) and a representative sample consisting of 256 Norwegian public health coordinators. The Norwegian case is an interesting example of mandatory coordination, since all Norwegian municipalities are required by law to create public health plans based on health overviews,

which in turn demand a high degree of cross-sectoral planning and coordination and require boundary spanning. In their analysis, Kiland et al. (2024) find that the significant factors for boundary spanning and health coordinators' ability to conduct successful public health overviews seem to be related to the size of the position to the health coordinator (i.e., full- or half time coordinator) and where in the municipal administration the coordinator is placed. The closer to the administrative apex, the more the impact and the greater the capacity. Municipal size was found to correlate significantly with the contact between boundary spanners, as well as with contact patterns between internal and external expertise and, in turn, the ability to conduct health overviews, which is a critical factor for implementing mandatory public health planning in Norwegian municipalities.

Högberg (2024)

The contribution from Högberg (2024) addresses how individual boundary spanners, through sense-making and framing processes, deal with organizational and institutional differences when engaging in cross-sectoral collaborations. Högberg (2024) addresses her research theme in a longitudinal case study of a cross-sector partnership between civil society organizations and a city municipality in a Sweden aimed at supporting a new and vulnerable group of EU citizens who had come to Sweden with limited means of supporting themselves. This policy context was defined by a pressing social challenge and the absence of clear legal foundations. The study draws on a range of qualitative methods, including interviews, document analysis, and observations of meetings and daily operations. The application of a longitudinal research design allows the study to move beyond time-static accounts and explore the time-dependent and dynamic processes involved in boundary-spanning activities. The study shows how specific components of boundary spanners' sense-making and framing processes contribute to more successful collaborations. Specifically, it highlights the importance of a) the creation of shared frames and drawing on ideas available externally to adapt them to fit local circumstances; b) meetings as important facilitators of boundary spanning, constituting sites for collective sense-making regarding issues of shared interest that enable frames to be communicated and shared; and c) the boundary spanners' ability to reframe the partnership's purpose and structure in response to changing circumstances and evolving goals, which was pivotal to its success.

Hoppe et al. (2024)

The contribution from Hoppe et al. (2024) is the result of a co-production, co-creation, and co-writing process guided by the important question of how public organizations adapt to include citizens as co-producers of public value. Somewhat untraditionally, the research project, the empirical basis, and the article itself are the outcomes of a co-creation process that involved academics, practitioners from municipalities, and a process manager (boundary spanner) responsible for the collaboration. The contribution is progressive and evokes memories of sociological action research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. Empirically, the contribution builds on a process regarding the renewal of a social contract (*Samhällekontraktet*) between Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna and Västerås municipalities, and the Västermanland and Sörmland regions in Sweden. By involving citizens affected by wicked social issues, the aim of the co-produced project was to find innovative solutions to handle complex social challenges. Several individuals from civil society and public organizations undertook boundary-spanning roles in the project. The main tasks of the boundary spanners were to align knowledge among the many participants, in addition to anchoring the social contract in their home organization. The authors discuss the experiences of the many partners involved and argue that there are many obstacles in the quest for public value through co-creation. Involving citizens as co-producers of public value seems mostly to be a normative idea for public organizations rather than a reality in their practices. The authors conclude that public sector organizations (in this case) are quite unable to involve citizens as equal partners in the co-production of public values, since public organizational structures and cultures are mainly tuned for leading and steering. The quest for co-production and intended citizen involvement can thus, as demonstrated by Hoppe et al. (2024), be regarded as much talk and little practice. Therefore, the outcome of intended citizen involvement seems to be about organizational hypocrisy and tokenism.

Concluding Discussion

The contributions in this special issue represent substantial variation regarding the cases and types of boundary spanning and add to the existing body of research on boundary spanning in a Nordic context (e.g., Hovik and Stigen 2023; Klindt et al. 2023). Boundary spanning does not necessarily refer to the activities of individuals with certain characteristics, skills, and organizational roles. Rather, organizational conditions have proven to be a key factor in successful boundary spanning, as the article by Kiland et al. (2024) demonstrates. Further research on boundary spanning might do well to investigate organizational and contextual conditions closer as prerequisites for boundary spanners' success and failure. In this regard, the study by Kiland et al. (2024) demonstrates the advantages of quantitative research by identifying the importance of some conditions over others across a larger number of cases.

Boundary spanners can also be objects that mediate and build trust among actors, as demonstrated in a highly original fashion by Gram (2024). This insight paves the way for developing the boundary spanner literature by interpreting boundary spanning through the perspective of new theories. Gram (2024) proves, for example, that actor network theory is a fruitful lens that can contribute with new insights and interpretations of organizational and human interaction and coordination through objects and virtual networks. In the pursuit of coordination and interaction between organizations and actors, it also turns out that traditional hierarchical coordination mechanisms can regain honor and dignity when faced with crises and major coordination challenges, as Klausen (2024) demonstrates. This finding adds to the body of evidence showing that the activities of boundary spanners engaged in collaborative governance also need support from bureaucratic structures to succeed (see e.g., Klindt et al. 2023). This lays the groundwork for interesting discussions with the literature emphasizing the critical role of trust and openness in collaborative governance to enable boundary spanners to succeed in various policy contexts (see, e.g., Alvinus and Larsson 2018; Bentzen and Torfing 2023).

Overall, the contributions in this special issue remind us that coordination and boundary spanning are not straight forward in practice, as also suggested by our initial impressions of the research from a Nordic context (see, e.g., Hovik and Stigen 2023). Thus, reality may often fall short of the promises and ideas proposed in the literature as, for example, demonstrated by the multiple voices forwarded by Hoppe et al. (2024) in this special issue—even in a celebrated region as the Nordic countries (De la Porte et al. 2023b). In this light, careful consideration is essential before undertaking boundary-spanning work, engaging in co-production, or implementing collaborative governance and network mechanisms for achieving grander reform objectives. Nevertheless, the literature is also ripe with studies showing that some ways of engaging in boundary spanning are likely to contribute to more successful collaborative outcomes than others as demonstrated by Högberg (2024) in this special issue.

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