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The Norwegian Climate Journalism – Lack of Knowledge or Activism?

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Abstract

This article describes three cases of malpractice of climate journalism by Norwegian media. The first case shows how temperature statistics for Svalbard was presented with several flaws and which created a false impression of a “hockey-stick” development. The second case shows how landslide statistics has been misused to create an impression of a dramatic increase, not supported by the underlying data. The third case shows how a journalist uncritically published a false claim by a climate scientist, and how the article still contains incorrect information.

Keywords: Climate journalism; Svalbard; landslide; Arctic Sea ice; Media bias

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1. Introduction

This article is a summary of a presentation held at *The Climate Knowledge Crisis* conference, held in Gardermoen Norway 30th and 31th August 2025.

Verstat.no is a website publishing climate related statistics, in-depth articles and critical review of media coverage of such statistics. Since its inception in 2020, verstat.no has published 135 critical articles which document weaknesses and malpractices in the media when covering climate statistics. This article describes three documented cases of malpractices in Norwegian climate journalism previously published on verstat.no.

2. Three cases of malpractice

2.1 NRK on Svalbard temperature statistics – the accidental “hockey-stick” graph

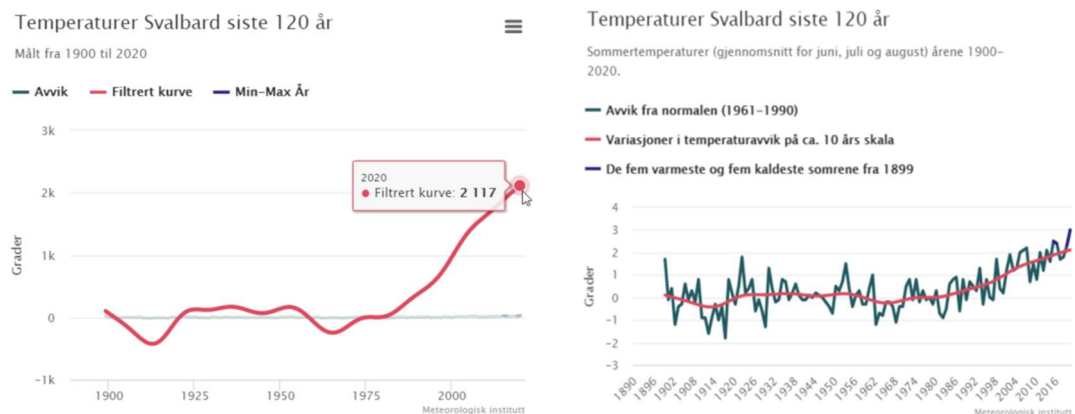


Figure 1: The original version of Svalbard summer temperature statistics presented by NRK (left), third attempt of corrected graph after questions from verstat.no (right)

On 5th September 2020, the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK published an article about the abnormal summer temperatures in Svalbard that year (NRK, 2020). The article presented long-term summer temperatures based on the reconstructed temperature series for Svalbard airport. The original chart is shown to the left in Figure 1. This chart was erroneous and presented filtered temperature values in thousands of degrees Celsius. When not showing the yearly unfiltered values, the chart creates a “hockey-stick” impression. After correction, shown to the right in Figure 1, the development is significantly more nuanced.

In verstat.no the same underlying data has been published (Østlid, 2025), see Figure 2. By showing both winter and summer mean temperatures in the same chart, we see an important fact; the summer temperatures are relatively stable from 1899 to 2000 and have since shown a modest increase in comparison to winter temperatures. It is the winter temperature development that has contributed mostly to the increased yearly mean temperatures in Svalbard from the 1970’s until today.

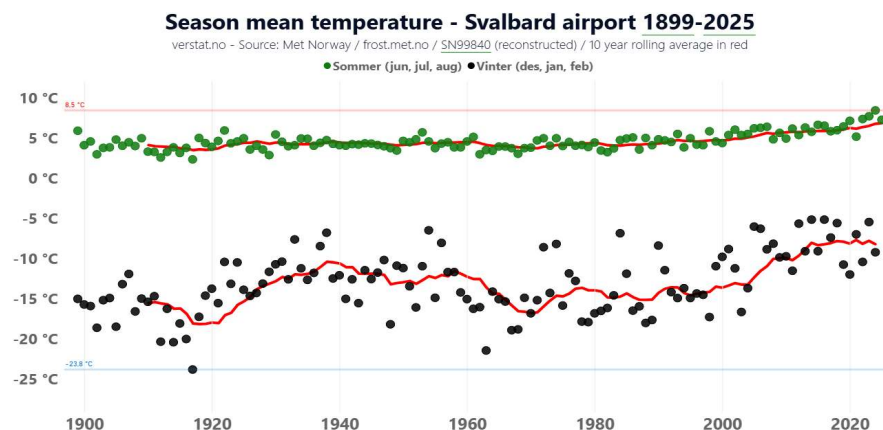


Figure 2: Seasonal mean temperatures for summer months (green) and winter months (black) for the reconstructed temperature statistics for Svalbard airport. Ten-year rolling mean in red solid line.

When showing all the underlying daily mean data unfiltered in one chart (see Figure 3), we get an impression of the Svalbard climate. The daily mean has a large daily variation in the winter, while the summer variation is significantly lower.

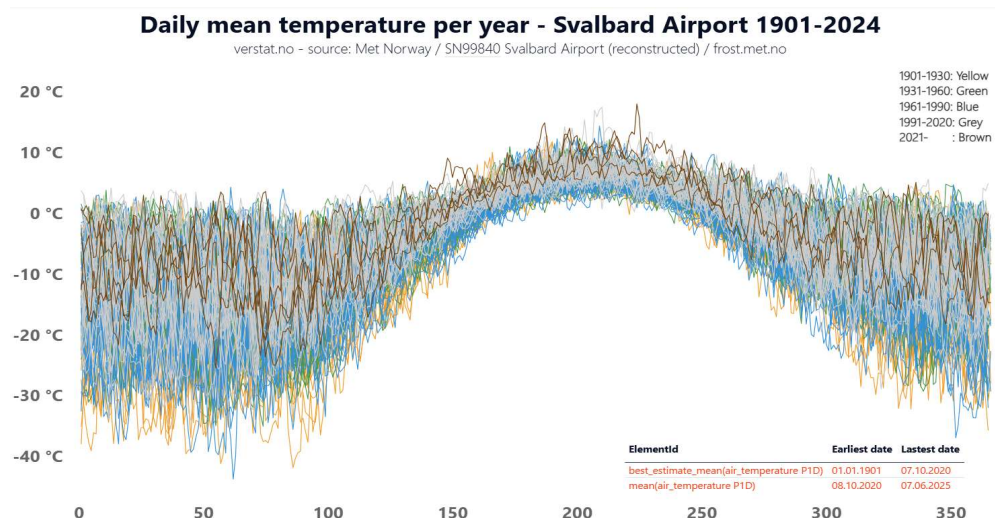


Figure 3: Daily mean temperatures per year for Svalbard airport. 1901-1930 in yellow, 1931-1960 in green, 1961-1990 in blue, 1991-2020 in grey, and 2021- in brown

2.2 NRK on landslide statistics – journalists withholding information

In the evening news on NRK on 5th August 2023 (NRK, 2023) there was a report on the increased insurance claims related to landslides in Norway and its claimed links to increased frequencies of landslides.



Figure 4: Screenshots of news report from NRK 5th August 2023. Chart showing average yearly insurance claims from landslides from 1980s to 2020s, and reporter claiming that the cause is more frequent and more powerful cloudburst rainfall (left). Chart showing registered soil- and flood landslides 1980-2022, subtitle show that NRK erroneously claim that the chart is showing development in actual number such landslides (right).

In this report, as shown in figure 4, NRK made conclusions on the cause of the substantial increase in number of insurance claims related to landslides, and linked the increase to a similar increase in registered number of soil- and flood landslides (water-triggered landslides). NRK claimed that the cause is due to more frequent and more powerful cloudburst rainfall.

The acting section manager Odd Arne Jensen from the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE), made oral statements in the news report that some of the 14-times increase in soil- and flood landslides is also due to better registration. But he believes that the increase we now see is due to climate change.

To verify the claims made by NVE, I asked for the total landslide statistics from NVE. The total statistics has been published on the verstat.no website (Østlid, 2023a):

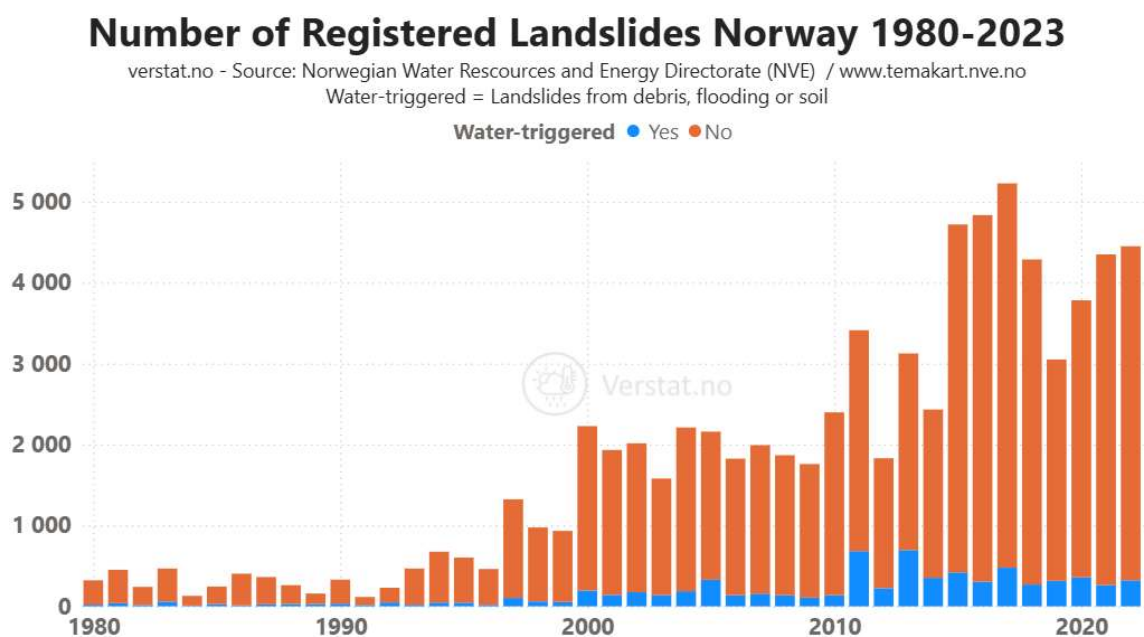


Figure 5: Norway landslide statistics by Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE), visualised and published by verstat.no. Data in blue (water triggered landslides) is similar to data presented by NRK (see figure 4, right).

The total statistics, as shown in Figure 5, shows that non-water-triggered landslides are by far the most frequent type of landslides registered in Norway (in orange). Both water-triggered (blue) and non-water-triggered show similar significant increase from 1980s to 2020s.

This important context was not mentioned by NRK in the news report.

To identify what information NRK possessed when making this report, I used the Freedom of Information Act to request to all NVE communication between NRK and NVE related to this news report.

The first reply from NVE to NRK about this statistic clearly shows that NRK was given this information alongside the total statistics. Excerpt from internal NVE email (Østlid, 2023b) from a senior engineer forwarded to the NRK journalist (translated to English):

“It's worth noting that one cannot simply say that these numbers reflect a real development in the number of landslide events, since the focus on registering such events has increased considerably in recent years. However, one might see that the proportion of water-triggered landslides has gone up in comparison with other types of landslides.”

The NRK journalist replied to this answer by pointing to the insurance claim statistics and the similar trend in the soil- and flood landslide statistics from NVE and asking for a comment on the development and causes. NVE replied to these questions with the oral statements from Jensen.

The news report ends with a dialogue between a NRK journalist and the Norwegian Climate and Environment minister.



Figure 6: Dialogue between NRK journalist (right) and Norwegian Climate and Environment minister Espen Barth Eide (left). News report NRK 5th August 2023 landslide related insurance claims and soil- and flood landslide statistics.

In this dialogue the NRK journalist claims: “We must cut emissions, but it going to slowly. This is the reality now”. The minister replies that what NRK have shown has been expected and he states that such landslides are getting more frequent.

2.3 NRK on Arctic Sea ice – took claim at face value, and uncorrected error

On 25th December 2022 NRK published an article about the Arctic Report Card for 2022 by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The article linked to a summary page for the report and listed some of its main findings. NRK claimed that one of the findings was that “the sea ice is becoming increasingly thinner.”

I examined this claim and did not find any evidence in the summary of the report of such a finding.

Figure 5 in the Arctic report card report on sea ice shows a stable development in the sea ice volume in the arctic (NOAA 2022a):

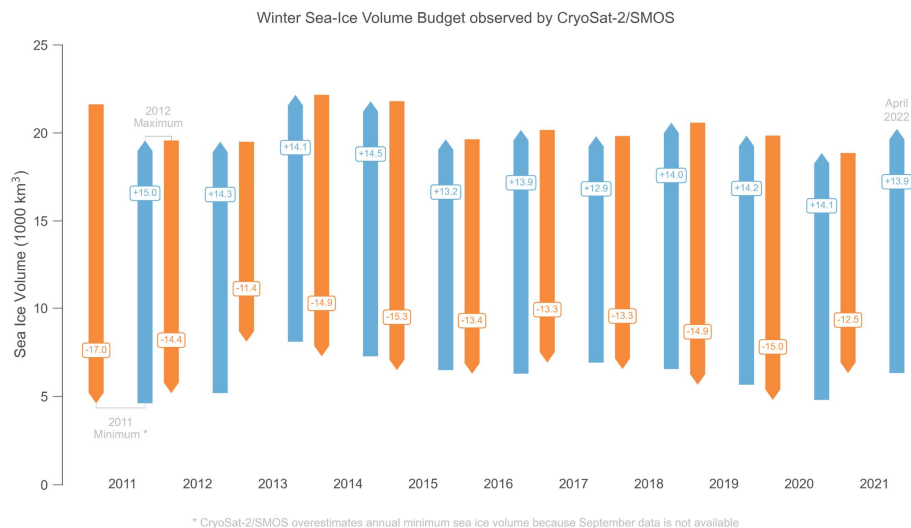


Figure 7: Fig. 5 Annual Sea ice volume loss (orange) and gain (blue) between annual maximum and minimum from CryoSat2/SMOS (satellite data). Data show stable development from 2011 to 2022.

After asking the NRK journalist about the discrepancy between the report and NRKs claim about the report's findings, I received the following reply (translated):

"The general trend is still that there is less sea ice when looking at a longer time perspective. Sorry if this wasn't explained clearly enough. Maybe we should include something about what you wrote regarding the stable ice thickness over the past ten years — I've spoken with several researchers about this, and one of them told me that the sea ice has been getting thinner and thinner. I took that at face value. Maybe that needs to be corrected!"

The NRK journalist admitted to taking a researcher's claim about the sea ice volume development at face value without checking the claim with the report findings.

After this exchange, NRK changed the article (NRK 2022):

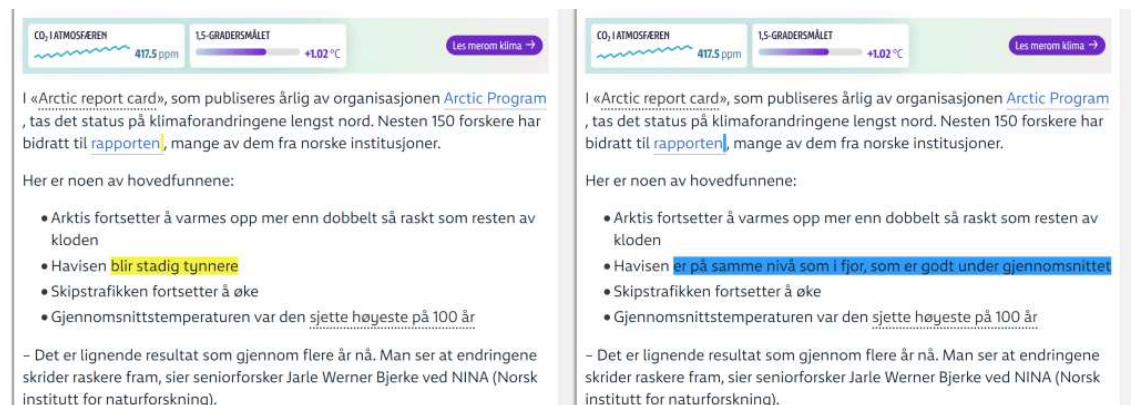


Figure 8: Internet Archive comparison between original article published 25th December 2022 (left) and change made 26th December 2022 (right). Original text in yellow and changed text in blue.

The corrected article now says, "The sea ice is at the same level as last year, but well below average," in line with the Arctic Report Card 2022 summary (NOAAAb).

In addition to the incorrect statement of the sea ice volume development, the article also claims that the "North pole could be ice free as soon as 2040". The claim is backed up by a link to another NRK article about research related to Barents Sea (NRK 2018), not relevant to the claim. NRK was notified about this mistake but failed to make a correction. The article still contains this statement with an unsupported source.

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