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# Boundary Work: Intermedia Agenda-Setting Between Right-Wing Alternative Media and Professional Journalism

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## ABSTRACT

Through a quantitative content analysis ( $n = 878$ ), this study examines and compares intermedia agenda-setting between right-wing alternative media outlets and mainstream online newspapers in the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Scholars have described the process of intermedia agenda-setting as an instrument used to uphold news norms within the journalistic community. Giving issue attention to another news media institution is considered a validation of the first news media's decision to report on a specific issue. This study, however, demonstrates how mainstream newspapers most often give issue attention to right-wing alternative media outlets in order to protect the boundaries of professional journalism as an institution as well as the limits of the debate from actors that are perceived as both journalistically and ideologically deviant. Regarding differences between the three countries, the findings reveal that the intermedia agenda-setting influence of alternative media outlets is higher in countries where populist actors are placed within "the sphere of legitimate controversy" (Norway and Denmark) than in countries where populist actors are banished to "the sphere of deviance" (Sweden).

## KEYWORDS

Boundary work; deviance; right-wing alternative media; intermedia agenda-setting; journalism; populism

## Introduction

Intermedia agenda-setting is a concept that is widely used to explain how different news media institutions give each other issue attention (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). Just as mass media coverage influences the public's agenda, different news media institutions influence each other's issue attention (Dearing and Rogers 1996). During the past two decades, there has been an increase in partisan news production (Stroud 2011), and evidence from the United States suggests that the mainstream media have become more attentive to and influenced by the agendas of partisan media outlets (Meraz 2011; Vargo and Guo 2017). In Scandinavia, partisan news production has increased due to the many apparently successful alternative media outlets that are characterised as either conservative, libertarian, populist or far-right extremist in their political orientation (Haller, Holt, and de La Brosse 2019).

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This study examines and compares intermedia agenda-setting between Norwegian, Swedish and Danish right-wing alternative media outlets and mainstream online newspapers. Right-wing alternative media typically question and challenge journalistic authority (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2018), and their core message is that the mainstream media conceal or distort information about the negative consequences of immigration (Haller and Holt 2018). These outlets also have a strong resentment towards professional journalistic ethics and norms (Holt 2016a). Despite this fact, these outlets tend to mimic mainstream online newspapers regarding their layout and journalistic style (Nygaard 2019). As such, they come across as quite controversial among professional journalists (Holt 2018). This raises the question of how professional Scandinavian journalism reacts to new quasi-journalistic actors that challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices and espouse controversial ideological views. *Do mainstream online newspapers give issue attention to right-wing alternative media?*

Scholars have described the process of intermedia agenda-setting as an instrument used to uphold the news norms within the journalistic community. Giving issue attention to another news media institution can be considered a validation of the first news medium's decision to report on an issue (McCombs 2004; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). This study, however, shows how mainstream online newspapers give issue attention to right-wing alternative media outlets in order to protect the boundaries of professional journalism as an institution (Carlson 2007; Coddington 2012) as well as the limits of the debate from actors that are perceived as both journalistically and ideologically deviant.

This study rests on a quantitative content analysis of 878 articles that contain references to right-wing alternative media outlets published in the online versions of the following six Scandinavian mainstream newspapers from 2012 to 2017: the Norwegian *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten*, the Swedish *Expressen* and *Dagens Nyheter*, and the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*. These newspapers are considered particularly influential news institutions, and their professional norms and ideologies are typical for the professional news media in general in Scandinavian countries. Since the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), Norway, Sweden and Denmark have, due to their many similarities regarding their respective political systems, media systems and culture, often been treated as one case. This study, however, aims to provide nuanced differences in how professional journalism in these countries responds to deviance.

## Alternative Media

Scholars often struggle to make sense of the complex relationship between mainstream and alternative media. Historically, the scholarly focus has been on left-wing alternative media, highlighting its potential to empower citizens by giving them the opportunity to advocate for social justice outside of the hegemonic mainstream media (Fuchs 2010; Haas 2004; Negt and Kluge 1972). As pointed out by Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019), early scholarly understandings presented mainstream and alternative media as binary oppositions; while alternative media were characterised as open, democratic and non-hierarchical advocates for social justice, mainstream media were characterised as uniform, profit-seeking, hierarchical, elitist and exclusive. More recent studies, however, have nuanced this binary approach, describing the relationship between mainstream

and alternative media as a continuum rather than in terms of separate categories (Atton 2002a, 2002b; Downing 2003; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Kenix 2011). According to Holt (2019), this concept is particularly relevant in the contexts of hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2013), where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish professional journalism from similar practices. Thus, Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019, 863) propose a relational understanding in the sense that alternative media act in relation to something that is already there. “Media of different positions that promise to oppose what they see as dominant, influential and agenda setting news media that shape the worldviews of citizens in a way that they don’t agree with and therefore seek to counter”. Such a conceptualisation also allows for the inclusion of right-wing initiatives, which were previously neglected in the scholarly conceptualisations of alternative media (Atton 2006; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019).

In recent years, right-wing alternative news media have become an essential part of the broader right-wing digital news infrastructure (Heft et al. 2019). While right-wing ideology and news has historically been mainly provided by right-wing organisations, parties, blogs and pundits, there has been a rise in online right-wing alternative outlets that claim to be journalistic in terms of disseminating not only opinions but also news (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). This development is also evident in Scandinavia, where the outlets range from conservatives – via populists – to far-right extremists in their ideological orientations (Haller, Holt, and de La Brosse 2019). Regarding the cases of this study, the ideological orientation of the Norwegian *Document* and *Human Rights Service*, the Swedish *Avpixlat* and *Fria Tider*, and the Danish *Den Korte Avis* can be placed on what Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2018) call the “border of the sphere of legitimacy”. This means that while they are sometimes invited into the mainstream media debate, they are often dismissed for being too radical. Although weekly use is still modest in comparison to legacy news media (between 6% and 11% in Sweden, between 4% and 7% in Norway, and 4% in Denmark) (Newman et al. 2019), studies have found that they are highly successful in eliciting user engagement in social media in both Norway (Larsson 2019) and Sweden (Sandberg and Ihlebæk 2019).

Empirical studies in the Scandinavian context have demonstrated an orientation towards populist anti-immigration, anti-elite and anti-system sentiments (Haller and Holt 2018), and their core message is that the mainstream media together with the political elite conceal or distort information about the negative cultural and societal consequences of immigration (Haller and Holt 2018). Generally, the scholarly literature highlights that these outlets blur the boundaries between objective news reporting and commentaries (Holt 2016b; Nygaard 2019) and that they reject or have an unclear relationship with press ethics and editorial responsibilities (Holt 2016a; Sandberg and Ihlebæk 2019). Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2018) examined how Norwegian outlets claim authority as media critics and found that media criticism is typically presented as a reaction to particular mainstream media news stories, which are used to substantiate generic claims that professional journalists are elitist, politically correct, biased and distanced from the people.

As such, the outlets’ relationship with the mainstream media has become rather adversarial, and intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative media outlets to mainstream online newspapers is therefore expected to be limited. Still, several scholars have argued that the news logic of the mainstream media contributes to the success of populist parties in Western democracies (Mudde 2007; Krämer 2014). It has been

suspected that populist politicians are given disproportionate mainstream media attention due to their conflictive behaviour and emotional appeal (Mazzoleni 2003), which may lead journalists to open the news gates for them (Wettstein et al. 2018). Because of their populist nature, this might also apply to right-wing alternative media outlets. Thus, it is crucial to examine how professional journalism reacts to new quasi-journalistic actors that challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices and that espouse controversial ideological views. As Carlson (2007, 264) notes, the role of new media actors cannot be adequately understood without investigating the established media context in which they appear. Therefore, this study asks:

**RQ1:** Do Scandinavian mainstream online newspapers give issue attention to right-wing alternative media outlets?

## Intermedia Agenda-Setting

While classical agenda-setting studies explore the issue of saliency feedback between the media's agenda and the public's agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), intermedia agenda-setting refers to how news media institutions affect each other's issue attention (Dearing and Rogers 1996; Golan 2006; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). Intermedia agenda-setting research originated in the 1980s as the fourth phase of agenda-setting research, having been triggered by concerns about whether journalists' co-orientation might result in a highly redundant and homogeneous news agenda (Mathes and Pfetsch 1991; Boczkowski 2010). The research tradition started out by identifying the "opinion leaders" among traditional news media outlets. In this respect, high-profile newspapers were often found to influence television, radio and other newspapers (Trumbo 1995; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008), while elite newspapers influenced local newspapers (Gold and Simmons 1965; Shaw and Sparrow 1999). After technological developments led to the availability of online media such as blogs and social media, scholars gradually incorporated those into the existing intermedia agenda-setting framework. U.S. scholars found evidence of mainstream media's dependence on top political bloggers (Cornfield et al. 2005; Meraz 2008; Wallsten 2011) and showed that these blogs are more often liberal than conservative (Wallsten 2011). Still, no research has been conducted on the topic of right-wing alternative media outlets in Scandinavian countries.

Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008) offer three reasons why intermedia agenda-setting takes place. The first is related to journalistic co-orientation in the way that media outlets take clues about an issue's priority from other media outlets (Dearing and Rogers 1996). The second reason is the competitive setting of media markets. Understaffed and underfinanced newsrooms may look to other news institutions to find issues to write about (Brandenburg 2002; Vonbun, Königslöw, and Schönbach 2016). The third reason is that these imitation processes help uphold the ethics and norms within the professional journalistic institution. To give issue attention to another news media institution is considered a validation of the original news media's initial decision to report on a particular issue. Thus, intermedia agenda-setting has been described as an instrument that can be used to create a common definition of what is news and what is not news (McCombs 2004; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). However, this study argues that the process of intermedia agenda-setting does not necessarily reflect a validation of other news media institutions' journalistic products and practices. On the

contrary, giving issue attention to other media outlets may very well serve as a creation of insider-outsider narratives aimed to perform boundary work, secure journalistic authority (Carlson 2016a) and protect journalism as a profession from actors that are perceived as journalistically deviant (Coddington 2012). Such insider-outsider narratives could also be used to contest what are perceived as “unacceptable” ideological orientations. As shown by Wettstein et al. (2018), mainstream newspapers tend to evaluate populist actors negatively.

Thus, mainstream online newspapers may give issue attention to alternative media outlets in order to critically scrutinise their journalistic products and practices, as well as their ideological position. Therefore, this study also asks:

**RQ2:** Is mainstream media coverage of right-wing alternative media outlets positive, negative, balanced or neutral?

### Protecting the Boundaries of Professional Journalism and the Limits of the Debate

The concept of boundary maintenance is rooted in Gieryn’s (1983) idea of “boundary work”, which refers to a field’s attribution of specific characteristics and norms aimed to create a social boundary between the field itself and neighbouring fields. Such boundary work is typically an attempt to maintain the field’s autonomy and to increase the field’s social and material resources. Regarding the field of journalism, several studies have noted the importance of common ideals, norms and ethics that constitute journalistic ideology (Deuze 2005; Steensen and Ahva 2015). As the boundaries of professional journalism are often indistinct or moving, they are open to so-called jurisdictional disputes (Abbott 1988) between neighbouring professions (Coddington 2012). Thus, journalistic authority is important. Carlson (2017) takes a relational approach to journalistic authority, arguing that it is not a stable trait that is either possessed or not possessed by specific speakers; rather, it is a social construct of the right to be listened to. This understanding is in turn “formed through the interactions among all the actors that are needed for journalism to exist” (7). Carlson (2017) argues that journalists claim authority by invoking a group’s identity based on its adherence to professional journalistic ethics and norms, textual practices and metadiscourse, the latter being journalism about what constitutes “good” or “bad” journalism. These aspects, however, have been increasingly challenged by digital technology, as anybody can give their own perspective on current events on digital platforms, which lowers the entry barriers to the occupation for people who do not necessarily have journalistic training or qualifications. This challenge is related particularly to new, digital, quasi-journalistic actors, such as alternative media, which operate alongside and in opposition to established mainstream media.

The professional news media not only protects the boundaries of its profession as a facilitator of public debate, but it also functions as a guardian of its legitimate boundaries – boundaries that are challenged by right-wing alternative media. In theorising how mainstream media institutions deal with different political actors and views, Hallin (1986) draws a distinction between three different spheres. *The sphere of consensus* represents those issues that journalists and the majority of society do not consider controversial. *The sphere of legitimate controversy* consists of those issues and viewpoints that are considered up for debate within the political mainstream and that people can agree to disagree on.

Finally, the *sphere of deviance* represents those actors and views that are considered unworthy of being heard. Hallin (1986) argues that journalists set aside the norm of neutrality to expose, condemn or exclude deviant actors that violate and challenge the political consensus to defend the limits of an acceptable and appropriate debate. Empirical studies from the Norwegian context have found that deviant actors are indeed deemed newsworthy by the mainstream media and are thus given attention. However, they are not given authority, as they are not granted roles as legitimate political voices (Figenschou and Beyer 2014; Larsen 2018).

As there are theoretical reasons to expect that the mainstream media may give issue attention to alternative media outlets in order to criticise their journalistic product and practices, and ideology, it is also necessary to investigate whether alternative media outlets are portrayed as journalistically and ideologically deviant. Therefore, RQ3 asks:

**RQ3:** Are negative and positive evaluations in mainstream media coverage related to alternative media outlets' journalistic product and practices and/or ideological orientations?

## Cross-national Dimension

Since the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), the Scandinavian countries have, due to their many similarities regarding their media systems, political systems and culture, often been treated as one case – a democratic, corporatist model characterised by strong, institutionalised professionalism, self-regulation and extensive schemes for state press subsidies. This study, however, aims to provide nuanced differences in how professional journalism in Scandinavian countries responds to deviance.

Two factors are expected to be of significance regarding differences between the countries: the political and media contexts. Regarding the former, the electoral success of right-wing parties, together with their participation in or support of governments, could be seen as an indicator of public tolerance for right-wing populist positions and, thus, their access to the mainstream media (Heft et al. 2019; Wettstein et al. 2018). Regarding the latter, while the Swedish populist party, the Sweden Democrats, has only been represented in parliament since 2010, populist parties have been represented in both Norway and Denmark since the 1970s. The Norwegian Progress Party has been a part of the conservative government coalition since 2013, while the Danish People's Party has been a support party for the liberal-conservative parties during the last decades. In contrast, the populist Sweden Democrats have been excluded from coalitions through a political *cordon sanitaire* (Wettstein et al. 2018), as a joint agreement has been established between the other parties to not cooperate with the "pariah party" (Jungar 2012).

Empirical evidence shows that mainstream media coverage of populist actors is more restricted and more negative in countries with a political *cordon sanitaire* than in countries without one (Wettstein et al. 2018). Regarding the Scandinavian media context, the Swedish press seems to be least favourable to right-wing actors and positions. Hellström et al. (2016) compared mainstream newspaper editorials discussing the Scandinavian populist parties from 2009 to 2012 and found that the Swedish editorials had the most critical tone by far. This impression is also supported by a comparative study of immigration coverage in the Scandinavian press from 1970 to 2016, which found that while the Swedish press was dominated by immigration-friendly views, the Danish press were more open to strong negative views on immigration. The Norwegian press occupied a



middle ground (Hovden and Mjelde 2019). Finally, Heft et al. (2019) examined the right-wing alternative media infrastructure in six Western democracies, among them Sweden and Denmark. While they identified ten outlets in Sweden, they only found three outlets in Denmark. They argued that the lower supply in Denmark might be related to the right-wing-friendly mass media context. Regarding the corridor of opinions on immigration in these countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark seem to represent quite different cases. Thus, drawing on Hallin's (1986) sphere model, the intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative media is expected to be lower in countries where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance (Sweden) and higher in countries where populist actors are considered to be placed within the sphere of legitimate controversy (Norway and Denmark). Similarly, it is expected that the Swedish outlets are evaluated negatively more often. This leads to the following research questions:

**RQ4:** Is the intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative media lower in countries where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance by the media and political establishments?

**RQ5:** Are right-wing alternative media evaluated negatively more often in countries where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance by the media and political establishments?

## Method

The study rests on a quantitative content analysis of 878 mainstream media articles that contain references to right-wing alternative media outlets. Two mainstream national online newspapers in each of the three countries at hand were selected for analysis: the Norwegian *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten*, the Swedish *Expressen* and *Dagens Nyheter*, and the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*. All six of these newspapers are among the most popular in terms of readership in their respective countries and are considered influential news institutions. Their professional norms and ideologies can be considered typical for the general professional news media in their respective countries.

The data was collected through Norwegian media archive Retriever and Danish media archive Infomedia. As there were very few references to Norwegian alternative media outlets in the Swedish and Danish newspapers – and vice versa – intermedia agenda-setting across countries was not investigated. All mainstream media articles containing explicit references to Norwegian alternative media outlets, Document and Human Right Service in Norwegian newspapers from 2012 to 2017 were included. The same procedure was followed for the Swedish alternative media outlets, Fria Tider and Avpixlat, in the Swedish newspapers, and the Danish alternative media outlet, Den Korte Avis, in the Danish newspapers. Right-wing alternative media outlets generally have a short life span in Denmark, except Den Korte Avis, which has existed since January 2012. Thus, only one Danish outlet was included. A quantitative content analysis was conducted to examine the references to the outlets. The codebook included the following variables:

- 1) Based on the typology developed by Broersma and Graham (2013), the appearance and function of alternative media references were examined to determine whether



mainstream newspapers give issue attention to right-wing alternative media. The following questions were asked: i) Does specific alternative media editorial content function as a trigger of the mainstream media story? ii) Are the alternative media outlets the subject of the story themselves, or iii) are the alternative media outlets related to the story's subject?

First, in order for intermedia agenda-setting, or issue attention, to take place, the reference must be coded as a "trigger". A reference is coded as a trigger of the story if the alternative media content is considered newsworthy in itself – meaning that it must be clear from the title, subtitle or first paragraph that specific alternative media content triggered the mainstream media article. Moreover, the alternative media content must be editorial to be coded as a trigger. Mainstream media stories about comments published in their comment sections by ordinary people cannot function as triggers. There is also the aspect of immediacy; if media outlets give each other issue attention, this attention must occur immediately in order for it to be considered an intermedia effect. If medium A adopts medium B after a few weeks, many real-world events may have caused medium A to also devote attention to the issue (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). According to Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008), the time lag should be set to one day in studies investigating intermedia agenda-setting between mainstream media outlets; however, since I do not believe that professional journalists monitor alternative media outlets on a daily basis, the time lag in the present study was set to two days. Second, the function of the reference was coded as the "subject of the story" if the overall focus of the article was about alternative media outlets. These articles typically concern alternative media as a phenomenon and explain larger trends at these outlets. Third, when the subject of the article was about something other than alternative media outlets, or alternative media outlets were only briefly mentioned, the article was coded as "related to the story's subject".

- 2) I coded for the tonality of the articles – whether the mainstream newspapers covered the alternative media outlets in a 1) positive, 2) negative, 3) balanced or 4) neutral manner. Stories that contained praise from either a mainstream media journalist or a source were coded as positive, while stories that included criticism from a journalist or a source were coded as negative. Stories including both criticism and praise were coded as balanced. Finally, stories containing neither criticism nor praise were coded as neutral.
- 3) I coded for whether the positive or negative coverage was related to alternative media outlets' 1) journalistic product and practices, such as how they relate to professional norms and ethics, editorial policies and objectivity in general discussions of whether they are conducting journalism or not, and/or 2) their ideological orientation.

The author conducted the initial coding. A second coder conducted an inter-coder reliability test by recoding 10% of the sample, which was randomly selected. Krippendorff's alpha was used for the measurement and resulted in 1 for the alternative media references, 0.80 for the tonality of the articles, 0.67 for the negative coverage related to the outlets' ideological position and/or journalistic product and practices, 0.83 for the positive coverage related to the outlets' ideological position and/or journalistic product and

practices, and finally, 0.81 for the intermedia agenda-setting. In the following section, the quantitative findings of the study will be presented.

## Results

In total, right-wing alternative media outlets were mentioned in 878 unique articles in the six newspapers during the six-year period of this study.

As Table 1 shows, the number of articles containing references to alternative media outlets was considerably higher in the Swedish newspapers compared to the Norwegian and Danish ones. The Swedish tabloid *Expressen* stood out with the highest number of articles during the period. This is because *Expressen* launched a campaign in 2013 that investigated people who had participated in racist discourse in the comments sections of Swedish outlets, revealed their identities, and confronted them with their comments. Many of these people were found to have connections to Swedish populist party the Sweden Democrats. Thus, several Swedish alternative media outlets, including Avpixlat, have often been linked to the Sweden Democrats by the mainstream media.

Regarding Norwegian coverage, the alternative media sphere received mainstream media attention after the July 22, 2011 terrorist attack when it was revealed that the perpetrator had participated in the comments section of the outlet Document. This led to a public debate on whether authoritarian views from the right-wing online sphere should be debated in the mainstream media or instead be silenced (Syvertsen et al. 2014). Fjenshou and Beyer (2014) empirically demonstrated how the anti-Islamic online sphere became highly newsworthy immediately after the attack. Thus, it is likely that the increased attention towards the anti-Islamic online sphere contributed to an upsurge in references to right-wing alternative media outlets during the investigated period. However, there have not been any mainstream media campaigns similar to those of *Expressen* in Norway. As for Danish newspapers, they seem less interested in alternative media outlets than their Norwegian and Swedish counterparts. Even though this study only included one Danish alternative media outlet, Den Korte Avis, this outlet is the most well-established and well-known outlet in Denmark; thus, it is likely that it would be mentioned in general mainstream media coverage and discussions of such outlets. The lower number of references in Denmark is likely also related to the fact that the supply and demand for right-wing alternative media outlets are more restricted in Denmark (Heft et al. 2019).

**Table 1.** References to right-wing alternative media outlets 2012–2017.

Country	Mainstream online newspaper	References to alt media	
		N	N
Norway	Dagbladet	120	263
	Aftenposten	143	
Sweden	Expressen	283	493
	Dagens Nyheter	210	
Denmark	Jyllands-Posten	67	122
	Politiken	55	
Total		<b>878</b>	<b>878</b>

### *Limited Intermedia Agenda-Setting Influence*

Regarding RQ1, the intermedia agenda-setting influence of Scandinavian right-wing alternative media outlets on mainstream online newspapers is rather limited. As Table 2 shows, this is most evident in Sweden, where issue attention given to alternative media outlets is almost non-existent, applying to only 1% of the articles.

The picture was different in the other two countries. The Norwegian newspapers gave issue attention to alternative media outlets in 12% of the articles, while the Danish newspapers gave issue attention in 9% of the articles. Although the intermedia agenda-setting influence from alternative media outlets is also limited in these countries, there was a substantial difference when compared to the Swedish newspapers. Furthermore, when considering that there was only one outlet included in the Danish material and that there were considerably more articles in the Swedish newspapers than in the Norwegian and Danish ones, the difference between the countries is conspicuous. Still, the most common mainstream media coverage of alternative media outlets was not in terms of giving issue attention but covering them as “related to the story’s subject”. This applied to 57% of the Norwegian newspaper articles, 66% of the Swedish articles and 53% of the Danish articles. This implies that alternative media outlets are just briefly mentioned, with no broader discussion of them as a phenomenon. Typically, a source or journalist mentions an outlet as an example of an “immigration critical”, “racist” or new media actor.

The second most common coverage in all three countries was that alternative media outlets were “the subject of the story”. This was the case for 31% of the Norwegian articles, 37% of the Swedish articles and 38% of the Danish articles. In these stories, the main focus was on describing right-wing alternative media as a phenomenon that may include discussions of their ideological positions, their journalistic products and practices, their comments sections, the people involved in producing their content and their business models. In the Swedish material, a substantial number of news articles were related to the aforementioned investigations in *Expressen*, which revealed connections to the Sweden Democrats. Accordingly, when alternative media outlets were the subjects of the stories in Swedish newspapers, these connections were often explained, discussed and condemned.

### *Overwhelmingly negative coverage*

In accordance with RQ2, I coded for whether the coverage of the alternative media outlets was positive, negative, balanced or neutral. The Swedish newspapers clearly stood out with a uniformly negative coverage, as 76% of the stories included criticism of outlets,

**Table 2.** Function of the alternative media references 2012-2017.

Country	Subject of the story		Related to the story's subject		Trigger – issue attention		N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Norway	83	31	149	57	31	12	263
Sweden	183	37	304	62	6	1	493
Denmark	46	38	65	53	11	9	122
Total	312		518		48		<b>878</b>

**Table 3.** Evaluations of the alternative media outlets.

Country	Negative		Positive		Balanced		Neutral		N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Norway	132	50	16	6	12	5	103	39	263
Sweden	377	76	-	0	14	3	102	21	493
Denmark	50	41	11	9	12	10	49	40	122
Total	559		28		38		253		<b>878</b>

and none are solely positive. Furthermore, only 3% were balanced in terms of including both criticism and praise of the outlets [Table 3](#).

In the other two countries, about half of the mainstream newspaper articles were solely negative – 50% in the Norwegian newspapers and 41% in the Danish ones. In contrast to the Swedish newspapers, some articles were solely positive in the Norwegian (6%) and Danish (9%) mainstream newspapers. Still, the overall impression was that criticism is the norm, as positive evaluations of the outlets seldom passed the mainstream media gatekeepers in all three countries.

There were also a relatively large number of neutral articles in all three countries that appeared to nuance the impression of overwhelmingly negative coverage. This applied for 39% of the Norwegian articles, 40% of the Danish articles and 21% of the Swedish articles. However, as [Table 4](#) shows, the neutral articles were most often coded as “related to the story’s subject”. This means that the source or journalist only briefly mentions the outlets, which leaves less room for evaluations.

As for giving issue attention to alternative media outlets, [Table 4](#) reveals that these articles were characterised by an overwhelmingly negative focus in the Norwegian and Swedish newspapers. This implies that mainstream newspapers do not give issue attention in the “traditional intermedia agenda-setting way” (i.e., in order to find issues to write about) or for journalistic co-orientation in terms of validation of the first news media’s initial decision to report on a particular issue. On the contrary, the Norwegian and Swedish mainstream newspapers most often gave issue attention to alternative media outlets in order for a journalist or source to evaluate them negatively. This picture was quite different in Denmark, where the articles giving issue attention to the outlets were most often neutral. This, taken together with the fact that there were also

**Table 4.** Evaluation by type of alternative media reference.

Tonality	Country	Subject of the story	Related to the story’s subject	Trigger – issue attention	Total
		N	N	N	
Negative	Norway	54	57	21	132
	Sweden	150	223	4	377
	Denmark	20	29	1	50
Positive	Norway	7	9	-	16
	Sweden	-	-	-	-
	Denmark	7	3	1	11
Balanced	Norway	7	4	1	12
	Sweden	9	4	1	14
	Denmark	9	1	2	12
Neutral	Norway	15	79	9	103
	Sweden	24	77	1	102
	Denmark	10	32	7	49
Total		312	518	48	878

more positive and balanced stories in the Danish newspapers, implies that outlets are perceived as less controversial among Danish mainstream journalists compared to their Norwegian and Swedish counterparts.

### ***Right-wing alternative media: Ideologically and journalistically deviant***

In correspondence with RQ3, I coded for whether the negative and positive evaluations were related to alternative media outlets' journalistic products and practices and/or ideological orientations. The negative evaluations in the Swedish (74%) and Norwegian (48%) materials were most often related to the ideological orientations of the outlets and thus portrayed them as ideologically deviant [Table 5](#).

On the contrary, as [Table 6](#) shows, there were more negative evaluations of the journalistic products and practices of the outlets (33%) than their ideological orientation (26%) in the Danish newspapers. Thus, Danish mainstream media journalists seem to be more oriented towards journalistic boundary work – to defend the professional journalistic institution against what are perceived as breaches of its boundaries (Coddington 2012).

This impression is supported by the fact that the Danish newspaper articles contained more positive evaluations of outlets' ideological orientations than their journalistic products and practices. In the Norwegian newspapers, positive evaluations of both aspects were quite rare, and in the Swedish newspapers, positive evaluations of these aspects were almost non-existent.

Finally, regarding RQ4, the intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative media was lower in the country where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance by the media and political establishment (Sweden), and, as addressed by RQ5, outlets are also evaluated negatively more often in this country.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The boundaries of professional journalism are increasingly being challenged by digital technology, as anyone can offer their perspective on current events on digital platforms. This study has explored how professional journalism responds to quasi-journalistic actors that challenge the boundaries of the profession as well as the boundaries of legitimate debate. The findings reveal that the intermedia agenda-setting influence of Scandinavian right-wing alternative media outlets are limited in the Norwegian and Danish mainstream newspapers and almost non-existent in the Swedish context. Furthermore, the results show that mainstream newspapers do not give issue attention to alternative media outlets in the "traditional intermedia agenda-setting" way (i.e., in order to find issues to write about or to validate another news institution's decision to cover a specific issue).

**Table 5.** Evaluations of the ideological orientations of the outlets.

Country	Negative		Positive		Total stories in country N
	N	%	N	%	
Norway	126	48	19	7	263
Sweden	364	74	3	0.6	493
Denmark	32	26	19	16	122
Total					<b>878</b>

**Table 6.** Evaluations of journalistic product and practice.

Country	Negative	%	Positive	%	Total stories in country
Norway	39	15	9	3	263
Sweden	61	12	10	2	493
Denmark	40	33	5	4	122
Total					<b>878</b>

On the contrary, issue attention is most often given to alternative media outlets to expose and condemn ideologically and journalistically deviant actors. Thus, future research should go beyond the issue level and pay closer attention to the actor level. Traditionally, intermedia agenda-setting has been described as the mechanism that creates a common definition of what is news and what is not (McCombs 2004; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). This study, however, demonstrates that intermedia agenda-setting also works as a mechanism of boundary work: to define what is a legitimate news actor and what is not. Future studies need to not only map how content and issues travel between the agendas of different media outlets and platforms but also how this content is received, interpreted and reframed. This is especially important in the context of digital hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2013), where it is often difficult to distinguish professional journalism from similar practices.

One could argue that the limited intermedia agenda-setting influence of the outlets implies that issues originating in these outlets are excluded from the broader mainstream media debate. However, the large number of articles in which the alternative media outlets are the “subject of the story” and their motivations and ideological orientations are portrayed and discussed implies that they are, in fact, given a platform. Thus, the ideological views provided by such actors are spread to a broader audience through mainstream online newspapers. Just as populist parties get mainstream media coverage due to their conflictive and emotional behaviour (Mazzoleni 2003), the same seems to hold true for right-wing alternative media outlets. Furthermore, the substantial coverage of the outlets as a subject, at least in the Swedish newspapers, may contribute to legitimising a perception that such outlets are increasing the amount of attention given to readership and support and thus are actors that one cannot simply ignore or exclude from the mainstream immigration debate. However, although alternative media outlets are deemed newsworthy and thus offered a platform, they are certainly not offered an uncritical one. The overwhelmingly negative coverage implies that the mainstream media is fulfilling its democratic role by informing and promoting public understanding of the motives and ideological views of right-wing alternative media while refraining from legitimising these actors (Larsen 2018). Right-wing alternative media are given attention; however, outlets are not granted a role as legitimate political voices (Figsenschou and Beyer 2014; Larsen 2018) or journalistic authority. In line with Carlson (2016b) and Hallin (1986), journalists seem to depart from professional norms of neutrality and balance when confronted with right-wing alternative media and feel authorised to treat them as marginal and deviant to protect the boundaries of legitimate debate and of their profession. This clearly unsympathetic coverage further illustrates how the mainstream media might risk finding themselves in the dilemma of being “both friend and foe”, as common political wisdom says that *any* publicity is good publicity (Mudde 2007, 252–253). Thus, overwhelmingly negative coverage might nourish

populist claims of the mainstream media as opponents who attack their ideological orientation and personnel (Wettstein et al. 2018). As argued by Holt (2018, 68), if right-wing alternative media manage to cause a stir by attracting harsh criticism from the mainstream media, their relational anti-systemness is significant and influences public discourse in a polarising way.

Another point for discussion is that one could confuse mentions of right-wing alternative media in mainstream newspapers with influence and a lack of mentions with insignificance (Kalsnes 2016, 10). Even if professional journalists do not refer to specific right-wing alternative media content in their news stories, this content might influence coverage of a particular issue or trigger the journalists to cover an issue in the first place. On the other hand, journalists may very well refrain from making references to outlets due to their dubious reputation and to avoid giving them authority as legitimate political voices or journalistic actors. Professional journalists may also find the content published by alternative media outlets irrelevant or, even more likely, offensive. Thus, future research on this subject should make use of semi-structured interviews to help clarify these uncertainties and gain more information about which types of alternative media content the mainstream media deem newsworthy and which types they do not. Do they, for instance, have any specific editorial policies on how to relate to alternative media outlets?

While Swedish and Norwegian mainstream coverage are more prone to portray alternative media outlets as ideologically deviant and thus act as guardians of the boundaries of legitimate debate, Danish coverage is more oriented towards journalistic boundary work; mainstream newspapers seem to create a social boundary (Gieryn 1983) between themselves and alternative media outlets to defend the professional journalistic institution against what they perceive as journalistic deviant actors. This indicates that Danish mainstream journalists, to a greater extent than the others, perceive alternative media outlets as a threat to the reputation and trust of professional journalism as an institution. In comparison, Norwegian and Swedish mainstream coverage rarely evaluate the journalistic product and practices of outlets, possibly implying that they simply reject the idea of these outlets as journalistic actors.

Finally, the findings are coherent with differences regarding the three countries' political and media contexts. The intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative media is lower in the country where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance through a political cordon sanitaire, as well as through a mainstream media context that appears narrow regarding the corridor of opinion on the immigration issue (Sweden). As expected, the intermedia agenda-setting influence was higher in countries where populist actors are considered within the sphere of legitimate controversy in terms of their political cooperation with populist parties and a broader mass media corridor of opinion on immigration (Norway and Denmark). Moreover, right-wing alternative media outlets were evaluated negatively more frequently in the country where populist actors are banished to the sphere of deviance (Sweden). Future research should include other countries to investigate whether these findings are a Scandinavian particularity or whether they also apply to other media systems. Another question to pursue is whether the synchronised behaviour exhibited by Swedish mainstream political parties and mainstream media (Wettstein et al. 2018) backfires and fosters conspiratorial ideas among citizens about collusion between the political and media elite in order to exclude or silence undesirable actors. Moreover, as the data is limited to only two mainstream online



newspapers and two alternative media outlets in Norway and Sweden and one alternative media outlet in Denmark, further research should include more publications for a broader examination of how mainstream media institutions in the Scandinavian countries respond to controversies and challenges from online quasi-journalistic actors.

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