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On the Mainstream/Alternative Continuum: Mainstream Media Reactions to Right-Wing Alternative News Media

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ABSTRACT

Using the mainstream media as a starting point, this article argues that the ongoing changes in the mainstream/alternative continuum are not just dependent on how right-wing alternative news media relate to certain journalistic practices but also on mainstream media reactions to their emergence. The following questions are thus asked: Are right-wing alternative news media accepted or rejected as journalistic actors, and are their ideological orientation deemed legitimate or deviant? This article combines insights into how the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media have become increasingly blurred in the digital context and uses the concepts of boundary work, interloper media and Hallin's three-sphere model to examine these questions in a Scandinavian context. Based on a quantitative content analysis of 430 online mainstream news articles, this study demonstrates striking differences between the Scandinavian countries. While there are few or no reactions from the Danish mainstream media, the Swedish mainstream media largely reject right-wing alternative media as journalistic actors and position their ideological orientation as deviant. The Norwegian case is found in between. The results contribute to developing the scholarly understanding of the mainstream/alternative continuum and, thus, right-wing alternative news media's position in the wider digital media landscape from a mainstream media perspective.

KEYWORDS

Boundary work; deviance; comparative research; interloper media; journalism; metajournalistic discourse; news; right-wing alternative media

Introduction

The rise of right-wing alternative news media in Western democracies has been highly controversial. When arguing that their emergence might fuel increased polarization of the public debate, critics have emphasized low-quality content, their harsh stance on immigration issues and their recurring critique of mainstream media. Supporters on the other side cheer for new alternative voices and perspectives on the issues of immigration and Islam (Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021).

Even though right-wing alternative news media position themselves as "outsiders" (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019) and can be understood as self-perceived correctives

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of the mainstream media (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019), these outlets often present themselves as journalistic actors in their own right (Heft et al. 2020). For instance, they claim to engage in both news reporting and commentary, which are well-established genres within professional journalism (Nygaard 2019). Despite the controversy surrounding these outlets, scholars have raised the question of how long it is justified to refer to some of them as “alternative,” as the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media are fluid and have become increasingly blurred in the digital context (Rauch 2016; Holt 2019; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Several scholars have also empirically demonstrated how right-wing alternative news media seem to have become more professionalized and moved closer to the mainstream media regarding some key dimensions (Holt 2016b; Heft et al. 2020; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Nygaard 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020). What these aforementioned studies have in common is that they take alternative media as a starting point and discuss how such outlets relate to certain professional journalistic characteristics or practices. However, to better understand the distance between mainstream and alternative media, it is also necessary to examine how the mainstream media react to the emergence of right-wing alternative news media. Therefore, this study takes the mainstream media as a starting point to argue that the ongoing changes in the mainstream/alternative continuum are also dependent on mainstream media reactions and ask the following questions: *Are right-wing alternative news media accepted or rejected as journalistic actors, and are their ideological orientation deemed legitimate or deviant?*

This article examines these questions through the concept of boundary work (Lewis 2012; Carlson 2015, 2019), which has been widely used by scholars to investigate how journalism as a profession reacts to new informational actors that are encroaching on its jurisdiction. The article then positions right-wing alternative news media under the umbrella of interloper media, which is understood as a subset of digitally native actors who originate from outside the boundaries of professional journalism but whose work still shares similar traits with journalism (Eldridge 2014). Interlopers are further defined by their engagement in critical metadiscourse about the mainstream media, and they sometimes use the guise of journalism to promote political and ideological agendas (Eldridge 2019b). Because it is expected that not only the journalistic performances of right-wing alternative news media but also their controversial ideological positions will be the target of mainstream media reactions, the article also draws on Hallin’s (1986) three-sphere model, which is an often-used analytical tool for analysing how the mainstream media react to different actors and their ideological positions.

The study has a cross-national dimension and is set in the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, which have often been treated as one case since the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) on the democratic corporatist media system. The study aims to provide nuanced differences regarding how similar cases guard the boundaries of the profession. The data are based on a quantitative content analysis of 430 news articles that contain references to right-wing alternative media outlets published in the online versions of six Scandinavian mainstream online newspapers from 2012 to 2017. Finally, this study contributes to developing the scholarly understanding of the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media, thus improving our understanding of the latter’s position in the wider digital media landscape from a

mainstream media perspective. Finally, it provides comparative insights into the research field of alternative media, where most studies draw on data from single-country cases.

Background: Right-Wing Alternative News Media

Historically, research on alternative media has been mainly concerned with left-wing activist initiatives, that highlight alternative media's potential to empower citizens through participation and how they operate in opposition to the hegemonic mainstream media in terms of offering alternative stories and perspectives (Negt and Kluge 1972; Atton 2002a; Fuchs 2010). In line with previous research on right-wing alternative media, this study understands mainstream media as editorial-driven news media (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019) that produce and publish news in accordance with professional ethics and norms within a societal system that is formed by specific legacy news media organizations (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020). Although a wide range of digital-born actors increasingly challenge the mainstream media, Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2020) indicates that mainstream news organizations are still the primary sense-makers in the Scandinavian digital information environment.

Alternative media initiatives can be found across the political spectrum from left to right (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019) and have become a widespread phenomenon since digitalization has made production and dissemination of alternative content cheaper and easier (Leung and Lee 2014). In Western democracies, the online alternative media scene is heavily skewed towards right-wing initiatives (Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020). This also holds true for Scandinavia, where such right-wing alternative news media have managed to engage an active follower base on social media in both Norway (Larsson 2019) and Sweden (Sandberg and Ihlebaek 2019). A number of empirical studies have recently investigated how these outlets mainly promote critical stories on immigration and Islam (Holt 2016a, 2016b; Nygaard 2019) and how they express extensive media criticism through arguments that the mainstream media are elitist, biased, leftist and fail to cover important issues (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019). Furthermore, it has been argued that these outlets fuel cultural division and promote exclusionary views (Padovani 2016). Thus, based on the traditional normative benchmarks of alternative media (i.e., democratic participation and empowerment of citizens) some scholars have argued that right-wing initiatives should not be termed alternative at all.

Although this study acknowledges the conceptual confusion related to right-wing initiatives, it still argues that it is appropriate to conceptualize them as "alternative media." First, studies have found that right-wing initiatives nourish participation and mobilize activism (Sandberg and Ihlebaek 2019). Furthermore, several studies have noted that the mainstream media play a crucial role in both left- and right-wing alternative media's self-perception in that they operate as correctives based on the perception that the mainstream media cover certain perspectives and actors unfairly (Holt 2018, 2020; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Various empirical studies have also confirmed that such a perception is widely articulated in Nordic right-wing

alternative media (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Holt 2019; Nygaard 2019). Thus, alternative media, including right-wing initiatives, can be understood as a reaction to something in front of them (Holt 2020), and a relational approach is useful to overcome the obstacles related to differences in ideological positions. Following such an approach, alternative news media can be understood as “a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 862). Furthermore, these actors provide “alternative news content” in terms of “alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events” (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 863). Thus, the terminology of alternative *news* media does not include fanzines and satire sites, which is often the issue of interest for scholars using the slightly more general term, alternative media.

It is important to note that many hybrids and few pure instances exist, which has left scholars struggling to grasp the complex relationship between mainstream and alternative media. Recent contributions, however, have agreed that the boundaries between the two have become increasingly blurred in the digital context (Atton 2002a, 2002b; Kenix 2011; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020). Thus, rather than proposing comprehensive definitions, scholars have pointed to some key characteristics or dimensions that can function as boundary markers between mainstream and alternative media (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Sandberg and Ihlebaek 2019). Several studies have used these dimensions to demonstrate how right-wing alternative news media seems to move closer to the mainstream. For instance, their business models are increasingly based on advertisement and subscription (Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021), and some key national Scandinavian outlets now claim adherence to the ethical guidelines of professional journalism (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021). Several studies have also demonstrated a stylistic orientation towards the mainstream media (Heft et al. 2020; Nygaard 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020). Finally, some key alternative media personnel have wide experience in the mainstream media (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019).

What these studies have in common, however, is that they take alternative media as a starting point and examine how such outlets relate to certain professional journalistic characteristics or practices. This study instead takes the mainstream media as a starting point because the distance between mainstream and alternative media is also dependent on mainstream media reactions – on whether right-wing alternative news media are accepted or rejected as journalistic actors. How the mainstream media react to similar actors and practices has often been studied through the concept of boundary work, which describes “the process through which definitions of social phenomena come to be accepted or rejected” (Carlson 2019, 1). The following section will clarify why this concept is useful for studying mainstream media reactions to right-wing alternative news media.

Boundary Work: Right-Wing Alternative News Media as Interlopers

Journalism scholars and practitioners have engaged in continued debates about how to understand journalism. Although the boundaries of the profession are constantly

changing (Tandoc 2019), the idea of what journalism entails is more or less consistent over time. First, journalism has been granted core normative roles within societies (Christians et al. 2009). Second, several studies have emphasized the importance of professional norms, ethics and practices that guide the profession (Steensen and Ahva 2015). Since journalism entered the digital context, however, questions of boundaries between professional journalism and similar practices have attracted increasing scholarly attention (Lewis 2012; Carlson 2017; Eldridge 2019a; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019).

A large body of literature has used the concept of boundary work to explore basic questions of definition, inclusion and exclusion: Who counts as a journalist, what counts as journalism, what is acceptable journalistic behaviour, and what is deviant? (Carlson 2015). Typically, journalists have performed boundary work through meta-journalistic discourses (Carlson 2016) by pointing to the aforementioned understandings of journalism's criteria of belonging, in their attempt to expel "bad apples" that have harmed the reputation of the profession. In the digital context, however, scholars have been less preoccupied with the boundaries between good and bad journalism and more oriented towards researching boundaries between in- and out-groups of journalism (Eldridge 2019a), which is also the ambition of this article. More specifically, this article contributes to the scholarly literature on expulsion-based boundary work, meaning contests over whether new informational actors that are encroaching on journalism's jurisdiction should be accepted as journalistic actors.

Thus, Eldridge's (2014, 2018) concept of interloper media is useful when analysing how the mainstream media react to new informational actors like right-wing alternative news media. The concept is built around a "subset of digitally native media and journalistic actors who originate from outside the boundaries of the traditional journalistic field, but whose work nevertheless reflects the socio-informative functions, identities and roles of journalism" (Eldridge 2019a, 857–858). Interloper media differ from other digital-born news sites in the sense that they are further defined by an often-explicit and -critical metadiscourse about professional journalism, which describes their own approach as a "better approximation of journalistic ideals" (Eldridge 2018, 83). Therefore, this concept is well suited for a study of mainstream media reactions to right-wing alternative news media – digital actors that claim to be journalistic actors in their own right (Heft et al. 2020) but at the same time engage in extensive media criticism in terms of challenging professional journalistic authority (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019).

Previous studies have discussed how the general mainstream media reaction to interlopers tends to be to reject them as out-groups by stressing their lack of belonging to the profession (Eldridge 2014; Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Carlson and Lewis 2020). In the digital context, boundaries have been demarcated as a response to, for instance, bloggers (Carlson 2007), user-generated content (Robinson 2010; Singer 2015) and initiatives like WikiLeaks (Coddington 2012; Eldridge 2014). Eldridge (2019b) argued that such reactions are based on the perception of interlopers as an existential threat to the profession. Therefore, traditional journalists might be hesitant to accept them as fellow journalists to avoid diffusing the strength of their own journalistic identity. As Lewis (2012, 845) argued, journalists try to preserve the

“collectively shared and taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the belief that journalists, acting in their normative roles, ought to wield gatekeeping control over news content on behalf of society.” It should be noted that I share Eldridge’s (2019b) argument of being cautious against a reliance on journalists’ perspectives alone because traditional actors might be predisposed to drawing a boundary between a core and a periphery of the profession. Still, I argue that research on how the mainstream media react to right-wing alternative news media is lacking in general and that comparative research in particular is necessary to enhance our understanding of right-wing alternative news media’s position in the wider digital media landscape across countries.

To examine whether right-wing alternative news media are accepted or rejected as journalistic actors, this study draws on Eldridge’s (2014) approach for studying in-group/out-group dynamics when analysing the mainstream media coverage of WikiLeaks. He argued that the use of familiar labels, such as newspaper, journalist and editor, can be regarded as a shared lexicon of belonging to the profession, which would indicate that an interloper is regarded as part of the accepted in-group. However, the absence of such labels, together with the use of vague labels, such as “website,” distances the interloper media from the profession and indicates that it is rejected as a journalistic actor. Following this approach, this study asks:

RQ1: Do the mainstream media use labels to denote whether right-wing alternative news media are accepted or rejected as journalistic actors?

Right-wing alternative news media differ from other interlopers in the sense that they not only challenge journalism by claiming to belong to the profession but also challenge professional journalism’s role as guardians of the boundaries of legitimate debate (Nygaard 2020). In this view, right-wing alternative news media can be placed within a particular category of interlopers: provocative interlopers operating on a spectrum between “agonism” (which refers to constructive disagreement) and “antagonism” (which refers to destructive opposition). Such interlopers often “use the guise of journalism to disguise more antagonistic ambitions, serving political agendas rather than public ones” (Eldridge 2019b, 15). For instance, Scandinavian right-wing alternative news media tend to use the guise of descriptive, and seemingly objective, news reporting to promote their political anti-immigration agenda. Thus, they ignore institutionalized journalistic ideals of objectivity, balance and neutrality to present “political propaganda disguised as journalism” (Nygaard 2019, 1159). Eldridge (2019b, 15) argued that such interloper media behaviour is “antagonistic towards the field of journalism writ large.”

Thus, when analysing how the mainstream media react to right-wing alternative news media, it is expected that not only their journalistic practices but also their ideological positions will be the target of mainstream media reactions. An empirical study of the intermedia agenda-setting influence of right-wing alternative news media also confirmed that the mainstream media tend to criticize right-wing initiatives for being ideologically deviant (Nygaard 2020). Because the concepts of boundary work and interloper media do not take into account whether the mainstream media demarcate boundaries for the ideological positions of interlopers, this study also draws on Hallin’s (1986) three-sphere model to examine whether right-wing alternative news media are labelled ideologically deviant.

Hallin's Three-Sphere Model

Journalism scholars have often used Hallin's (1986) three-sphere model to analyse how the mainstream news media react to different actors and ideological positions (Figenschou and Beyer 2014; Larsen 2018). Hallin (1986) distinguished between three different spheres. First, *the sphere of consensus* represents those issues that the majority of society do not consider controversial, for instance, acceptance of democracy. Within this sphere, journalists do not feel compelled to balance issues with opposing views. Second, *the sphere of legitimate controversy* consists of those issues and views that are considered up for debate within the political mainstream and those that people can agree to disagree on. Within this sphere, journalists feel obliged to exercise impartiality between competing claims and claimants. Third, the *sphere of deviance* represents those actors and views that are considered too inappropriate, extreme or unworthy of being heard. Hallin (1986) argued that journalists tend to 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 legitimate debate. The model also recognizes the mainstream media as the guardians of the boundaries between the different spheres and, therefore, their power to deem certain actors as "legitimate" or "deviant."

Because Hallin's model does not consider that some actors and views cannot easily be classified as wholly legitimate or unambiguously deviant, this study also draws on Taylor's (2014) reconceptualisation of the model in the analysis. Taylor distinguished between the *sphere of implicit deviance* and the *sphere of explicit deviance*, where the former refers to opponents being reported in distinctly "cool" terms but without being overtly condemned (e.g., through negative characterizations, such as "immigration-critical"), while the latter refers to the use of evaluative language in the form of unambiguously derogatory labels, or linking them to pure evil (e.g., by using labels like "racist" or "Nazi"). As these labels give people extremely negative connotations, no matter what background, they will set the labelled actors apart from what is considered mainstream or "legitimate" (Taylor 2014; van Spanje and Azrout 2019). Hallin's and Taylor's models are useful as analytical tools, as they enable researchers to investigate whether the mainstream media demarcate boundaries for interlopers by labelling them as ideologically deviant. The models are thus used to conceptualize how the mainstream media react to right-wing alternative news media, which in turn informs the scholarly debate on the distance between mainstream and alternative media. Therefore, this study asks:

RQ2: Do the mainstream media use evaluative labels to denote the ideological orientation of right-wing alternative news media?

Cross-National Dimension

This study has a cross-national dimension, and the aim is to provide nuanced differences regarding how the mainstream media in the Scandinavian countries, which are regarded as similar cases (Hallin and Mancini 2004), guard the boundaries of the journalistic profession. There are still very few empirical comparative studies of the

Scandinavian right-wing alternative media scene. Therefore, it is necessary to be careful when discussing what might cause differences between the countries. There are a few exceptions, however. First, Heft et al. (2020) demonstrated a substantially higher supply and demand for right-wing alternative news media outlets in Sweden than in Denmark. They suggested that this might be related to a Danish mainstream media context that is highly favourable for right-wing actors due to its openness to political incorrectness. Regarding Sweden, they argued that the presumed existence of a so-called opinion-corridor in the Swedish mainstream media contributes to a limited range of politically incorrect issues and opinions, which in turn increases the demand for right-wing alternative media.

Second, Nygaard (2020) pointed to the same differences regarding the countries' mass media contexts when discussing why the intermedia agenda-setting influence from right-wing alternative news media to mainstream online newspapers is lower in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. Finally, using content analysis, Schwarz and Hammarlund (2016) found that Swedish mainstream newspapers often label right-wing alternative news media as "racist" and "hate sites." Based on these empirical contributions, when considering the following question, I expect to find a more extensive use of labels that demarcate boundaries for right-wing alternative news media in Swedish mainstream newspapers than in the other two countries:

RQ3: Is there a more extensive use of labels that demarcate boundaries for right-wing alternative media in countries with a narrow mainstream media corridor of opinion on the immigration issue (Sweden) than in countries without (Denmark and Norway)?

Data and Method

This study is based on a quantitative content analysis of mainstream news articles ($N = 430$) that contain references to right-wing alternative news media outlets. The online versions of the following mainstream newspapers were selected for analysis: *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten* in Norway, *Expressen* and *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden, and *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken* in Denmark. These are established, national legacy newspapers which professional ethics and norms are representative for legacy newspapers in general in their respective countries.

The data were collected through the Danish and Norwegian media archives Infomedia and Retriever. The timespan was set from 2012 to 2017 because the right-wing alternative media first started to receive substantial mainstream media attention in Scandinavia in 2012. All news articles containing an explicit reference to the Norwegian alternative media outlets *Document* (founded in 2003) and *Human Right Service* (founded in 2002) in Norwegian newspapers from 2012 to 2017 were included. The same procedure was followed for the Swedish alternative media outlets *Fria Tider* (founded in 2009) and *Avpixlat* (founded in 2011 and rebranded as *Samhällsnytt* in 2017) for Swedish newspapers, and for the Danish alternative media outlet *Den Korte Avis* (founded in January 2012) for Danish newspapers. These are the leading Scandinavian outlets in terms of readership. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, 9 and 11% of the Swedes report weekly use of the leading Swedish outlets, *Avpixlat/Samhällsnytt* and *Fria Tider*. The weekly use of Norwegian *Document*

(7%) and *Human Rights Service* (5%) is somewhat lower. In Denmark, 4% reported weekly use of *Den Korte Avis* (Newman et al. 2020).

There are lower supply of and demand for right-wing alternative media in Denmark (Heft et al. 2020) than in Sweden and Norway, and therefore, the Danish sphere only has one established actor: *Den Korte Avis*. In Norway and Sweden, however, the right-wing alternative media spheres consist of, respectively, three and eight rather established actors, and thus, two right-wing outlets were selected for each of these countries to allow for a broader examination. Moreover, for the study's purposes, the term "right-wing alternative news media" refers to digital actors that 1) offer at least a rudimentary form of institutionalized journalism by self-describing as a news provider and/or by disclosing information about editorial responsibility and 2) provide current nonfictional content (Heft et al. 2020). Within this understanding, blogs, fanzines and satire sites are excluded.

Because the aim partly was to examine whether mainstream journalists set aside the norm of neutrality to expose, condemn or exclude deviant actors (Hallin 1986; Taylor 2014), analysis of news articles was most convenient in this context. Therefore, the material consists solely of news articles because the journalists are expected to refrain from including subjective elements within this genre and because the news genre is supposed to be objective, or at least neutral, balanced, impartial and fair. However, it is important to note that, from a hermeneutic perspective, one could argue that any kind of reporting relies on the journalist's interpretive frames, and thus, completely neutral news reporting is impossible (Hjarvard 2010).

To identify if and how mainstream journalists label right-wing alternative news media, open coding, as opposed to coding after predefined categories, was conducted. This was done because there are no existing studies on how such outlets are labelled in the mainstream media across countries. It is also likely that mainstream journalists in different contexts use different labels to describe them. Thus, constructing predefined categories was not beneficial. Regarding RQ1, open coding was performed to identify whether the journalists used familiar labels, such as "online newspaper," "journalistic" and "editorial," that could be regarded as a shared lexicon of belonging to the profession (Eldridge 2014), or whether they used no labels at all or vague labels, such as "website," "online media" or "blog," indicating distance from the profession and out-group status. Regarding RQ2, open coding was conducted to identify if the journalists used ideological labels to describe right-wing alternative media, such as "right-wing," "racist," "xenophobic" and "immigration and Islam-critical," or no labels at all. However, two labels that could not be considered strictly ideological were still included, as they were widely used in the Swedish material. The first was "hate site," which was the most common label in the Swedish material. The second was "SD-connected," which implies an ideological affinity to the populist Sweden Democrats.

The author coded the material, and a second coder was trained to contribute to an intercoder reliability test by recoding 10% of the sample. Krippendorff's alpha was used for this measurement and resulted in 1 for the alternative media references, 0.96 for the labels related to the outlets' ideological positions and 0.92 for the labels used to denote whether the outlets were perceived as journalistic actors.

Table 1. Media labels.

Country	Website	Blog	Online forum	Alternative media	Online media	Online newspaper	No label	Total news articles
Denmark	1	–	–	–	21	15	11	48
Norway	25	–	–	–	–	–	76	101
Sweden	227	2	1	2	2	9	38	281
Total	253	2	1	2	23	24	125	430

Results

Regarding RQ1, [Table 1](#) shows that the labels mainstream journalists used to describe right-wing alternative news media clearly reject them as journalistic actors. While they were most often referred to as “websites” in Norway and Sweden, Danish mainstream journalists predominantly labelled them as “online media.”

Neither of those vague labels (“websites,” “online media”) indicates that interlopers were regarded as part of the accepted in-group, as they do not signal belonging to journalism’s core normative roles in societies or the ethics and norms guiding the profession. Thus, the absence of familiar labels, such as “journalistic,” “editorial” and “newspaper,” distances right-wing alternative news media from journalism as a profession and indicates that they are rejected as journalistic actors (Eldridge 2014). This illustrates that, although right-wing alternative news media, as interlopers, position their work as news reporting or some sense of journalism, they still struggle to be recognized as such by the in-group of the profession.

However, the Danish case provides some mixed results, as *Den Korte Avis* was labelled as an “online newspaper” in 15 of the articles. As a content analysis cannot provide any evidence of what caused this mixed result, future research should conduct qualitative interviews with mainstream journalists to clarify this matter. Furthermore, it must be noted that, although Swedish right-wing alternative outlets were also labelled “online newspapers” a few times (nine instances), this was certainly not a common practice, considering that the vast majority (227 of 281) were referred to as “websites.”

Another interesting finding is that Norwegian journalists quite often use no label at all (76 of 101 instances). In these articles the alternative outlets are simply referred to by brand name. This is also quite common amongst the Danish journalists (11 of 48 instances), and might indicate that the journalists in these countries consider the brand names as relatively well known.

Finally, mainstream journalists not only rejected right-wing alternative news media as journalistic actors; they also seemed to reject their self-perception as “alternative media,” as this label was never used by Norwegian and Danish journalists and only twice by Swedish journalists.

Regarding RQ2, [Table 2](#) reveals striking differences between the countries concerning what labels mainstream journalists used to denote the ideological orientation of right-wing alternative news media.

First, it was not common for Danish journalists to use ideological labels at all, as there were only three instances of such labels being used. All three labels described right-wing alternative news media as “immigration- and Islam-critical,” thus placing it in the sphere of implicit deviance, meaning that it was deemed as neither wholly legitimate nor overtly deviant (Taylor 2014). Still, as such labelling was quite rare and

Table 2. Ideological labels.

Country	Immigration- and Islam-critical	Right-wing	Xenophobic	Racist	Right-wing extremist	Hate site	SD-connected	No label	Total news articles
Denmark	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	45	48
Norway	36	1	–	–	–	–	–	64	101
Sweden	2	–	35	6	10	121	8	99	281
Total	42	1	35	6	10	121	8	208	430

Danish journalists, for the most part, used no labels at all (45 of 48 instances), right-wing alternative media seemed to be more permanently positioned in the sphere of legitimate controversy, indicating that they were perceived as irrelevant and of little concern.

In Norway, however, right-wing alternative media seemed to shift in and out of the sphere of legitimate controversy and the sphere of implicit deviance, as they were either labelled as “immigration and Islam-critical” (36 instances) or no ideological labels were used at all (64 instances). Thus, as Norwegian journalists more often labelled right-wing outlets as deviant, they seemed to be somewhat more controversial among Norwegian journalists than among their Danish colleagues.

While Norwegian and, to a very little extent, Danish journalists used labels that are very close to the legitimate right-wing position of the ideological scale, Swedish journalists clearly placed right-wing alternative news media within the sphere of explicit deviance by labelling them racist (six instances), right-wing extremists (10 instances), xenophobic (35 instances) and SD-connected (eight instances). The latter label refers to the Swedish populist party, the Sweden Democrats, which originally had its roots in fascism, and thus, this label is certainly no badge of honour. The most common label, “hate site” (121 instances), however, is not strictly ideological but has become a quite normal epithet to describe right-wing outlets across Swedish mainstream media organizations (Schwarz and Hammarlund 2016). Because such labels give people extremely negative connotations regardless of their background, they contribute to setting the labelled actors clearly apart from what is considered mainstream or “legitimate” (van Spanje and Azrout 2019). By linking the outlets to pure evil, the Swedish journalists clearly position right-wing alternative news media in the sphere of explicit deviance (Hallin 1986; Taylor 2014) and thus depart from standard norms of neutrality to expose, condemn or exclude deviant actors that violate and challenge the political consensus to defend the limits of an acceptable and legitimate debate. However, because a substantial amount of news articles did not include any ideological labels at all (99 instances), the Swedish outlets also seemed to shift in an out of different spheres: the sphere of legitimate controversy and the sphere of explicit deviance.

Finally, regarding RQ3, these results confirm previous empirical findings of the Swedish and Danish cases as two different poles, with the Norwegian case in a middle position (Heft et al. 2020; Nygaard 2019, 2020). There was a more extensive use of labels that demarcate boundaries for right-wing alternative news media in terms of rejecting them as journalistic actors and condemning them for being ideologically deviant in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has explored the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media. Several studies have pointed out how the boundaries between the two are increasingly difficult to discern in the digital context (Kenix 2011; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020), and some have empirically demonstrated how alternative media seem to have become more professionalized and moved closer to the mainstream media regarding some key dimensions (Holt 2016b; Heft et al. 2020; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Nygaard 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020; Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021).

Taking the mainstream media as a starting point, this study has provided new empirical evidence about right-wing alternative news media's position in the wider digital media landscape across countries. First, the results are in line with previous studies conducted within the frameworks of boundary work and interloper media. The general mainstream media reaction to interlopers tends to be to reject them as out-groups by stressing their lack of belonging to professional journalism (Eldridge 2014, 2019a, 2019b; Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Carlson and Lewis 2020). This is evident in how mainstream journalists most often use vague labels like "website" and "online media" to describe them. Such vague labels, together with the absence of familiar labels such as "online newspaper" and "journalistic," distance right-wing alternative news media from professional journalism and indicate that mainstream journalists reject them as journalistic actors (Eldridge 2014). This implies that, although the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media are increasingly difficult to point out in the digital context, these boundaries are still drawn and perceived as meaningful from a mainstream journalist perspective. Thus, from this perspective, right-wing alternative news media's position in the wider digital media landscape seems to be peripheral.

Several scholars have argued that mainstream journalists might be predisposed to rejecting interlopers as journalistic actors to protect their own journalistic identity (Lewis 2012; Eldridge 2019b) and the credibility of the profession from what they perceive as unqualified laypeople encroaching on their turf. As the use of labels is not the only way to make distinctions between in-group and out-groups, future research should conduct qualitative interviews with mainstream journalists to examine what specific strategies they use to demarcate boundaries for right-wing alternative news media. For instance, do some journalists avoid referring to right-wing outlets because they find them concerning and do not want to give them a platform?

This study has also demonstrated the necessity to incorporate an ideological perspective when investigating mainstream media reactions to the emergence of certain interlopers. This is because right-wing alternative news media differ from other interlopers in that they not only challenge professional journalism by claiming to belong to the field, but they also challenge journalism's role as guardians of the boundaries of legitimate debate. They are "provocative interlopers" that tend to "use the guise of journalism to disguise more antagonistic ambitions, serving political agendas rather than public ones" (Eldridge 2019b, 15). This is evident in the findings from the Norwegian and Swedish contexts: journalists tend to use evaluative, ideological labels

to signal that they perceive the ideological orientation of right-wing alternative news media as deviant, or apart from what is considered mainstream or legitimate. By doing so, mainstream journalists depart from the norm of neutrality to expose, condemn or exclude right-wing alternative news media in order to defend the limits of an acceptable and legitimate debate (Hallin 1986).

Considering the worldwide rise of digital interlopers that use the guise of journalism to serve their own political and ideological agendas, scholars preoccupied with the concepts of boundary work and interloper media should incorporate this ideological perspective embedded in Hallin's model when researching mainstream media reactions to such actors. Hallin's (1986) three-sphere model has often been used by scholars to analyse how the mainstream media react to different ideological positions (Figenschou and Beyer 2014; Larsen 2018), and has proven useful in combination with the concepts of boundary work and interloper media. Moreover, by combining Hallin's (1986) and Taylor's (2014) models, this study has provided a more fine-grained analysis of mainstream media reactions to interlopers. As Taylor (2014) has argued, Hallin (1986) leaves questions about precisely what it entails to be described as "deviant," and consequently, his model does not take into account that some actors and views cannot easily be classified as wholly legitimate or unambiguously deviant. This is especially relevant when considering the striking differences found between the Norwegian and Swedish cases. If applying only Hallin's model, these two cases would be lumped together as belonging in the sphere of deviance and would not account for the distinct differences between the two – hence, the value of the "implicit deviance" and "explicit deviance" categories.

Furthermore, the most striking differences between the countries are found along the ideological perspective. While Danish right-wing alternative news media seem to be more permanently positioned in the sphere of legitimate controversy, Norwegian right-wing alternative news media seem to shift in and out of the sphere of legitimate controversy and the sphere of implicit deviance, indicating that Norwegian journalists consider these actors somewhat more deviant than their Danish colleagues. Finally, the Swedish case stands out, as only the Swedish journalists use labels that give people extremely negative connotations, such as "racist," "xenophobic" and "hate site," thus positioning the outlets in the sphere of explicit deviance. When considering these substantial differences between the countries, it is necessary to raise the question of whether Swedish outlets are in fact more deviant in their ideological orientation than their Norwegian and Danish counterparts. This question illustrates a problem within this field of research; it is difficult to place these outlets on a right-wing to far-right scale due to the lack of in-depth interview studies and systematic longitudinal content analysis (Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021). Still, there have been a series of conflict and controversy surrounding the outlets in all three countries. For instance, left-wing activists have repeatedly urged companies not to advertise on these outlets due to their ideological positions, which has led many companies to boycott them. Moreover, they have received considerable negative public attention due to the lack of moderation of racist discourse in their comments sections. Thus, the ideological orientations of these outlets are surely not just perceived as highly controversial in Sweden.

Future research should investigate whether this finding is related to the reach of right-wing alternative news media outlets. As demonstrated by Newman et al. (2020), the Swedish right-wing outlets are more successful regarding readership than the Norwegian and Danish ones; while 9 and 11% of the Swedes report weekly use of the investigated outlets, the weekly use of the Norwegian (5 and 7%) and Danish (4%) outlets is lower. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask whether the need to label right-wing alternative news media as deviant is positively associated with the reach of the outlets? Could it be that the more success such outlets have, the more mainstream journalists feel the need to warn the public about their ideological views? Future research should explore this in greater detail.

Furthermore, as these results confirm previous empirical findings of the Swedish and Danish cases as two different poles, with the Norwegian case in a middle position (Heft et al. 2020; Nygaard 2019, 2020), the narrow Swedish mainstream media corridor of opinion on the immigration issue might be another possible explanation for the observed differences. Future studies should include more countries to further explore how different political, cultural and mass media contexts influence mainstream media reactions to such interlopers.

Finally, mainstream journalists do not only reject right-wing alternative news media as journalistic actors, they also do not follow their self-perception as “alternative media,” as this label was never used by Norwegian and Danish journalists in the selected articles, and only twice by Swedish journalists. This rejection of their self-perception as an “alternative” to their own journalistic product, ethics and norms is not surprising considering the main findings of this study that mainstream journalists reject right-wing alternative news media as journalistic actors and that they perceive their ideological orientations as deviant. This is also in line with what we can expect from the mainstream media, as the general mainstream media reaction to interlopers is to demarcate boundaries by emphasizing their lack of belonging to the profession. Still, this finding is valuable for researchers working on the mainstream/alternative continuum in terms of exploring the distance between mainstream and alternative media. Although several studies have empirically demonstrated how right-wing alternative news media seem to have become more professionalized and moved closer to the mainstream media regarding some key dimensions (Holt 2016b; Heft et al. 2020; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Nygaard 2019; Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020; Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021), this process is certainly not working the other way around, especially not in the Swedish and Norwegian contexts. As argued by Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019), evaluations of alternativeness can differ depending on the perspective: a right-wing outlet can proclaim its alternativeness without being accepted as such and vice versa. Therefore, it is crucial that researchers within this field precisely describe from which position the “alternative media” label is used and ask the following: How do the actors in question use it? And is this label accepted or rejected by others, for instance competitors, audiences, political authorities and mainstream organizations?

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