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# Boundary Work in the Nordic Media Model: Metajournalistic Discourse on Alternative Media in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing prominence of alternative news media has been identified as a particular challenge to contemporary established journalism, next to collapsing financial models, platform dependency, falling levels of trust and increased competition. Against this background, this study examines how news editors from 23 established news organizations in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark view the rise and role of alternative news media and thereby the boundaries of the journalistic field. Combining strategic action field theory, boundary work and the concept of metajournalistic discourse, it identifies three metajournalistic discourses—*We are the (real) journalists*, *We are in control (for now)*, and *We are under pressure*. Together, these metajournalistic discourses portray alternative news media as a challenge that largely has been overcome, and as currently insignificant actors that clearly do not represent “real journalism”. At the same time, the discourses also display concerns that alternative news media might represent potential future field ruptures via their association with broader potentially detrimental media developments, such as genre-confused media audiences or harassment of journalists.

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Alternative media; boundary work; metajournalistic discourse; Nordic media model; news editors; journalistic field

## Introduction

Over the last decades, journalism scholars have been concerned with the position and authority of established news media due to collapsing financial models, platform dependency, falling levels of trust and increased competition (Carlson 2017). Faced with these multiple “crises of journalism”, incumbent, established news organizations have been resilient, though often significantly weakened (Ferrucci and Eldridge II 2022; Ryfe 2019). Particularly the flourishing of digital media initiatives has made distinctions between journalism and journalism-like actors more complex and contentions between professional journalists and various peripheral actors more intense (Eldridge 2019; Maeres

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and Hanusch 2023; Reese 2020). Alternative media represent an intriguing challenger to the journalistic field because their position at the periphery is expressed and enacted in different ways. Broadly defined as media aiming to counter the political and media mainstream (e.g., Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebæk et al. 2022; Mayerhöffer 2021), alternative media challenge journalism from a variety of ideological positions, degrees of radicalism and levels of professionalism, and the exact lines between professional and alternative news media have become increasingly blurred (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Kenix 2011). Extant studies have examined their editorial aims (Brems 2023b, 2023a; Haanshuus and Ihlebæk 2021; Kristensen, Henriksen, and Mayerhöffer 2023; Mayerhöffer 2021; Rae 2021), journalistic practices (Brems 2023b; Heft, Ramsland, and Mayerhöffer 2024; Mayerhöffer and Heft 2022), place in online news sharing networks (Heft et al. 2020, 2021; Kristensen, Henriksen, and Mayerhöffer 2023), and their relation to journalistic institutions such as press councils (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). Further, studies of alternative news media's role as media critics find that they often criticize professional journalistic practices and news agendas to increase their own authority and undermine the media establishment (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). Importantly though, while some conduct aggressive media criticism attacking journalism and journalists, others can contribute to media diversity in constructive ways (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023). Both digital infrastructures (Heft et al. 2020), media systems (Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021), and institutional contexts (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022; Mayerhöffer 2021; Reese 2020) impact the development of alternative news media scenes internationally. In some contexts, alternative news media have been able to mobilize professional and public support for their projects both inside and outside the field of journalism (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023) by aligning with radical movements and politicians, capitalizing on public discontent with journalism, producing unconventional and contested news and views, engaging new audience groups, gaining visibility, and building digital networks on social media platforms. In other contexts, alternative news media's impact on journalism has been more ephemeral or non-existing.

Although the challenge of alternative news media has attracted major scholarly, political, and popular attention (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebæk et al. 2022), we know strikingly little about how established news organizations meet these emerging media actors. Studying how established news media understand and respond to alternative news media will arguably broaden the knowledge of how established actors assert authority over the evolving nature of journalism in response to societal changes and technological advancements, and how they distinguish themselves from other forms of communication in the contemporary information landscape. This study is guided by the following research questions:

How do established news media respond to the challenge of alternative media? What kind of meta-journalistic discourses are used to draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders in journalism?

Exploring these questions, the present article provides new insights into how established news media perceive unpredictable and antagonistic challengers and the complexity of mainstream-alternative relations. More generally it illuminates how journalism meets new, digital, peripheral actors producing news and views that bear resemblance to journalism (see also Carlson 2017; Eldridge 2019; Maeres and Hanusch 2023; Reese 2020).

Second, analysing how established news media perceive alternative news media and how they collectively position themselves against such challengers, the article sheds light on the discursive boundary-work that legacy media actors perform to constitute and legitimize journalism as a field (Carlson 2016; Farkas 2023a, 2023b; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), the power dynamics and stability of the journalistic field, and their own field position as incumbents (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023). Third, situating the study on the macro and meso level, the study enables grounded empirical insights on the power and positions of established news media within different media systems and political contexts (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023).

To identify discourses constructed by established news media vis-à-vis alternative media and what these meta-journalistic discourses tell us about the state of journalism, we have conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 23 news editors from the main news organizations in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. The three countries share many similarities, and they can all be placed within Nordic media system, where established news organizations have been comparatively strong (Andersson 2023; Schrøder, Blach-Ørsten, and Kæmsgaard Eberholst 2020), but also where alternative news media have made a mark, particularly in the Swedish context (Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021). Theoretically, the paper combines insights from strategic action field theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023), boundary-work (Carlson and Lewis 2020), and metajournalistic discourses (Carlson 2016) that provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the dynamics at play when ruptures in the field occur.

In the article, we identify three interrelated discourses showing how established news media perceived themselves to have bounced back against the challenges arising from the growth of right-wing alternative news media during the refugee crisis in 2015 and the US election in 2016, showing the resilience of legacy journalism in a Nordic context. At the same time, news editors stress the underlying vulnerability of the journalistic field to digital newcomers operating at the periphery of journalism. This is to a large degree framed around uncertainties about how knowledgeable audiences are in detecting “real” journalism from “look-alike” practices that do not respect or value the ethical codes at the core of the professional field. Finally, alternative media are perceived as connected to a wider, potentially harmful digital counterculture of unconstructive media criticism to the point of harassment of individual journalists.

## Theoretical Background

To study how legacy journalism responds to alternative media, we address journalism as a strategic action field approaching it as a meso-level social order where actors behave and interact based on a shared understanding of the existence and purpose of the journalistic field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). This approach builds on Bourdieu’s field theory as well as institutional perspectives, emphasizing that fields share some core features that actors are socialized into and that are accepted by the field (Benson and Neveu 2005; Eldridge 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023; Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019; Örnebring et al. 2018). Building on institutional theory, it stresses how news production routines and news output remain strikingly similar from one news outlet to the other, in spite of variations in context, audiences and formats (Cook 2006). Overall, institutional approaches emphasize journalism’s durability and persistence over time (Ryfe 2019), but also how and why the

boundaries of the journalistic institution have become increasingly blurred (Ferrucci and Eldridge II 2022). How stable or instable the journalistic institution is depends on how successful actors are in convincing others about the rules of the field. While actors in a field compete for positions, status, and material rewards, they also collaborate to maintain the field's existence (Fligstein and McAdam 2012), foregrounding journalism's role in society and democratic mission (Deuze 2005; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). In stable fields, skilled individual and collective actors manage to reproduce the field, including its dynamics and distribution of resources, through mobilizing the support of others. Powerful internal actors, which in journalism predominantly have been incumbent media organizations with long traditions in journalism and high status in the field, defend and reproduce journalism through the enactment of practices and ideals. Importantly, they are often supported and strengthened by governance units, which are actors that oversee compliance in the field. Within journalism this is typically press or industry organizations that serve to defend the role of journalism in democracy and to protect ethical and professional values as a common ground for who is perceived to be inside and outside (Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2023). In addition, a strategic action field often relies on the support of the state or other related fields, which recognize its purpose and importance (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

However, a field can also face shocks and ruptures and cease to exist if challengers manage to severely weaken the field's position, autonomy, and authority. Social fields are most often destabilized by external forces such as "invasions" by outside groups that are not bound by the conventions of strategic action field to the same extent as incumbents; changes in neighbouring fields which set in motion processes of mobilization among field insiders; or macroevents destabilizing the broader social/political context (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Faced with the threat of destabilization, incumbents seek to stabilize and preserve the field to maintain their privileges. They mobilize collective frames, re-emphasize field membership and collective identity, and strengthen field coalitions. The need for incumbents to be skilled mobilizers of collective action is particularly important in less institutionalized, fluid fields, such as the contemporary journalistic field. For challengers to make a lasting impact, they can benefit from changes in the field's rules or from controlling previously misunderstood or underappreciated resources which become important and can be used in new ways (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

In the context of our study that explores how incumbents meet, talk about, and relate to the challenge from alternative media, we focus on incumbents in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, as we examine how they part take in boundary work. Boundary work broadly refers to how social actors signalize and enact insider and outsider positions, which in our case concerns mechanisms defining journalism from non-journalism (Carlson 2016; Carlson and Lewis 2020). Boundary processes can, according to Carlson and Lewis (2020), lead to expansion, expulsion, and protection of autonomy in the professional field. In the context of our article, expansion of boundaries entails how the definition of what journalism is and who can call themselves journalists can change and become more inclusive, incorporating new actors and practices into the professional community. Expulsion refers to how journalists who break the rules of the profession may be expelled, defending the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable or unacceptable practices. Protection of autonomy points to how journalism works to fend off challengers who wish to influence or shape journalism, which in our case can be illustrated by the rise of alternative media actors criticizing and competing with the field.

One specific and important form of boundary-making takes place through metajournalistic discourse, which, according to Carlson (2016, 362), is a useful way to “delimit some part of this larger discursive terrain to make it knowable”—as it has also been done in studies of metajournalistic discourse in relation to for instance artificial intelligence (Moran and Shaikh 2022), racism (Dindler and Blaagaard 2021), and fake news (Carlson 2018; Farkas 2023a; 2023b). As Matt Carlson (2016) argues, the term *metajournalistic discourse* can be defined as the public expressions that evaluate the content, practices, and reception of journalism. According to Carlson, it is through three overlapping processes of *definition making*, *boundary setting* and *legitimization* that actors inside and outside journalism form, debate, and contest meanings of journalism as a cultural practice.

In this context, the process of definition making refers to a shared language and narratives among actors in the discursive field of journalism that provides meaning, which again are affirmed, altered, or developed as conditions change or existing definitions become points of contention. The central questions underlying this interpretive process are therefore questions like “what is journalism?” and “who is a journalist?”. This, in turn, is closely related to the process of boundary setting, which might then be described as the discursive constitution of what is *not* journalism, in other words the construction of insiders and outsiders. Boundaries affect the distribution of symbolic and material resources (for example access to press subsidies), but also who is viewed as an “epistemic authority” (Carlson 2016, 360). Together with definition making, boundary setting thus establishes “the core distinctions through which journalism comes to be an understandable and finite cultural practice” (360). Underlining the overlapping character of the three interpretive processes, these core distinctions are the basis for the third process of legitimization, which can be understood as the outcome of the discursive struggle or negotiation, where certain news actors, forms and norms achieve legitimacy. Carlson emphasizes that this does not assume agreement between actors and that established definitions and boundaries continuously face contestation and competition by critics and proponents of alternative journalistic forms (especially in the light of current media developments), but the metajournalistic discourse that gains legitimacy is concretely expressed in “the types of news that gets developed, the actors who create them, and their perception as legitimate by actors outside news” (361).

As the above—especially Carlson’s use of the word “process” to denote metajournalistic discourse and the attention to discursive struggle—indicates, the constitution of journalism as a discursive field is a matter of how legitimacy both stabilizes and changes, which requires us to understand the specificity and positions of actors engaged in metajournalistic discourse in different national and transnational contexts (e.g., different media systems).

### **Journalistic Boundary Work in the Nordic Media Model**

We study the metajournalistic discourse on alternative media in three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden) and thus in the context of democratic-corporatist, Nordic media systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Humprecht et al. 2022) We argue that the Nordic media system represent a “most likely” critical case for the existence of a metajournalistic discourse on alternative news media and is thus particularly suited to delineate the nature of such discourse (Flyvberg 2006). In these systems, boundary struggles

between alternative and mainstream media can be expected to be particularly pertinent for two main reasons:

For one, the institutional boundaries of the established journalistic field are here historically very strong and well-defined. As “media welfare states” (Syvertsen et al., 2014), they strongly rely on principles of professional self-regulation, an understanding of news media as a public good, a strong expectation of news media to contribute to fostering democracy and a preference for cooperation between stakeholders (the state, media outlets, industry associations and the public) in shaping and regulating the media market. The possibility for alternative news media to gain membership in professional and industry organizations, to participate in self-regulatory bodies and the press-ethical system and to qualify for state subsidies are consequently important markers in journalistic boundary work in the Scandinavian countries (Ihlebak and Figenschou 2022; Vos 2019). All three countries are characterized by (comparatively) high levels of media trust and high levels of general as well as digital news consumption (Newman et al. 2023; Schröder, Blach-Ørsten, and Kæmsgaard Eberholst 2020).

Secondly, alternative media represent relatively a new phenomenon in the Nordic media system, where there is no strong tradition for anti-establishment oriented, non-institutionalized challenger media. When it comes to this relatively new alternative news media landscape, the three countries share important commonalities but also differ in some ways. In all three countries, right-wing, in particular migration-critical news outlets have in recent years dominated the (public perception of the) alternative news landscape and are also most consistently using the term “alternative media” to refer to and position themselves (Holt 2020; Ihlebæk and Nygaard 2021). Despite this prominent role of right-wing alternative news media, all three countries also feature other types of alternative news media, including left-wing and libertarian alternative news media, anti-systemic and conspiratorial media, as well as alternative media that seek to provide a counterweight to established journalistic genres and practices (e.g., slow news media) (Blach-Ørsten and Mayerhöffer 2021; Mayerhöffer, Kristensen, and Ramsland 2024). The supply of and demand for alternative news is most established in Sweden, and least so in Denmark, with Norway taking a middle position (Heft et al. 2020; Kok-Michalska 2024; Mayerhöffer, Kristensen, and Ramsland 2024). These differences have been linked back to national differences in terms of whether more radical political actors are shunned from participation in government formation, party-political cooperation and appearance in mediated public debate (Heft et al. 2021). While these differences inform the interpretation of our findings, the main analytical aim is to identify commonalities in the metajournalistic discourse across the three countries.

## Methodological Approach

This study is based on 23 semi-structured interviews with editors from leading legacy media organizations in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1). News editors were selected because they have responsibilities for editorial decisions, but also direct involvement in the everyday journalistic practices and priorities. Most interviewees held the title “news editor”, but there were some minor variations (title, internal organization) between news organizations. In a few cases our interview requests led to interviews with editors-in-chief.



**Table 1.** List of media organizations.

	Sweden	Norway	Denmark
TV broadcasters	SVT TV4	NRK TV2	DR TV2
Newspapers	Aftonbladet Expressen Dagens Nyheter Göteborgs-Posten Sydsvenskan	Aftenposten Dagbladet Klassekampen Nettavisen VG Vårt Land	Berlingske BT Dagbladet Information Ekstra Bladet Jyllands-Posten Politiken

The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and November 2023, and they all lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were organized as semi-structured research interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) based on a common interview guide around six overall themes: Understanding of alternative media; editorial practices; media criticism; the conditions and boundaries of journalism; press ethics; media subsidies. Small adjustments were made in the interview questions for the specific national contexts of each of the three countries.<sup>2</sup>

We conducted a discourse analysis via a reiteration of read-throughs of the interview material (see Farkas 2023b), which were divided into three overall rounds. In the first round, we identified general patterns within the six interview themes across the three countries and different media organizations. Here, we especially noted whether alternative news media were considered to conduct journalism, whether alternative news media were considered as competitors or colleagues, and how the established news editors described editorial practices. In the second round, we worked inductively to identify and systematize specific words and phrases the news editors used to describe (the values and practices of) their own media organizations/legacy media in general vis-à-vis alternative news media, and we found and labelled key quotes from the transcripts to exemplify the general patterns. In the third round, these words, phrases, and labels were connected and clustered into more abstract categories to analytically detect and ground the dominant meta-journalistic discourses in the material. In the following analysis, we present the three metajournalistic discourses that we observed as the most prevalent.

## Analysis

### (i) We are the (real) journalists

This first discourse (re)confirms core journalistic values as central discursive boundary-markers. To establish a clear distinction between established news media and alternative media, the editors draw on well-known terminologies around journalism, constructing a fundamental dichotomy between professional journalism and “non-journalism”. It is played out along several discursive constructs ranging from ethical practices, membership/subscription to key journalistic institutions, and perceptions of who are colleagues and peers.

The *we are the (real) journalists*-discourse is first and foremost expressed through stressing the difference between ethical and unethical practices. Editors underline how they follow “industry quality standards” and “ethical codes” in contrast to alternative media

which are characterized as “unprofessional”, “amateurish”, and “unpredictable”. By actively contrasting ethical/unethical, balanced/opinionated, professional/amateurish, the editors build a boundary based on ethical practice. This quote from a Norwegian news editor is illustrative of such boundary-marking:

They don't have the ethical standard that we believe we should follow, particularly related to source criticism, fact checking and the right to respond - the cornerstones of journalistic practice. So, we barely cite them or use them as sources, but we do keep an eye on them. (EDITOR 8, NO)

This discursive distinction has real-life implications in the daily news work of the interviewed editors and their newsrooms. The most apparent is that it is common practice *not* to quote or refer to stories from alternative media outlets the same way news organizations would quote each other. This builds on an assumption that alternative media would rarely or never have stories or sources which would be relevant to tap into in their own news coverage, and, moreover, that news stories from alternative media are not seen as credible verified news but categorized as “tips” and “ideas” that must be investigated and developed before publication. In the few newsrooms where stories building on alternative media coverage have been published, this has caused internal controversies over whether they should be cited or named as a source, and if so, how the reference should be written, indicating that steps towards including alternative media as reliable news outlets are highly contested. For those with a more liberal take on citing stories from alternative media, labelling is of importance informing their audiences of the source position in the media landscape, as this quote shows:

A news item is a news item, that's our attitude. But we have a document that we have made available to everyone in the editorial office, which is a mapping over the major alternative media sites, including what type of media it is, what to name it, what kind of background it has. It makes it easier for the reporters to refer to them as sources, but also to name them correctly. (EDITOR 4, SE)

The editors further foreground the difference between media that have an “opinionated”, “partisan” or “agenda-driven” editorial aim (alternative media) and established news media which are seen as being without an agenda. This discursive construct is defining alternative media as “narrow”, “biased” and “agenda-pushing”, stressing how such political agendas make alternative media less balanced, credible, or likely to seek out all sides of a story. Interviewees stress that alternative media mix news and opinions, which undermines the boundary between objective, impartial journalism from the communication of partisan information:

It is much more obvious what kind of worldview they depart from in their reporting than what is the case with established news media. You can easily decode from what position they come from. You can see it in how they select the news, what topics they are interested in, and how they frame their stories. Journalism is never completely neutral or objective, but the ideological dimension is very obvious in alternative media. (EDITOR 4, SE)

I think the decisive difference is that we are doing journalism, we are not making opinions. We have two sides to a story, and we have several different sources. So, credibility must be the key word. (EDITOR 21, DK)

The denunciation of agenda-driven alternative media is found in all countries but is particularly pronounced in Sweden. By foregrounding ethical practices as a boundary marker, this

discourse revolves around the notions that alternative media are “unprofessional”, “amateurs” or “reckless” actors, unable or unwilling to follow the proper journalistic way of working.

The distinction between journalists and alternative media actors is formalized through marking that responsible journalists are part of and loyal to the ethical system (i.e., the press codes, press councils). Especially the Norwegian editors repeatedly used the formal inclusion into the ethical system and the declaration of editorial independence as very concrete demarcations of who is seen as accountable news organizations and who’s not. The news editors employ the boundaries of the ethical system to draw multi-layered distinctions between established news media and alternative media actors—between media organizations aiming to be included vs. those that choose to stay on the outside; between those who are included in the ethical system vs. those who are denied access; and, between those who are loyal members of the self-regulatory system vs. those members who obstruct and undermine the system from within. Even if the primary distinction is made between those media included and those on the outside, editors emphasize that alternative media actors included in the ethical system do not necessarily adjust, as illustrated in the following statements:

It depends on whether one is willing to work within the press ethical framework—and through this can be defined as doing journalism. That’s the defining question here, not necessarily the political positions [of alternative media actors]. (EDITOR 14, NO).

In the self-regulatory system, if we are sanctioned, we take it seriously. It marks the boundary for what is deemed ethical journalism, and we seek to avoid conducting the same mistake again. But these actors, even when they are included in the system, they do not respect it. If you don’t respect the system, it doesn’t really have an effect. (EDITOR 5, SE)

Based on these distinctions, editors underline that they do not consider alternative media actors as colleagues. When asked directly, most news editors clearly demarcate between themselves (“journalists”) and alternative media actors (“not real journalists”). How editors argue for this division varies, but it often reflects the editors’ self-perception of their own professional and personal identity, as exemplified in these quotes:

We’re not colleagues, because we use different methods and work in different ways [...] And even though our practices can differ from other [established] newspapers, this case is different because [the alternative media’s] way of producing and publishing—I don’t recognize it. (EDITOR 10, NO)

It is so far from the way we do journalism that we can’t really reflect ourselves in it. And then there are those who are a bit in-between, the party press. I don’t think we consider them colleagues because they don’t have an objective basis. And that is quite crucial for us. But they lie somewhat in-between. (EDITOR 17, DK)

The strong symbolic distinction, not being “one of us”, reconfirms key field values and a sense of belonging. At the same time, the spatial metaphor of core and periphery, which is indirectly applied in the latter quote, also allows for in-between positions, where some (types of) media organizations might be labelled as more legitimate and perhaps as closer to journalism. However, while these media might be considered recognisable or somewhat sincere and serious, that is, if they were seen as “honest” and “transparent” about their ideological or opinion-based starting points, they would still not be fully acknowledged as real journalist/journalism.

## (II) We are in control (for now)

The second discourse underlines that although journalism today is situated in a chaotic and hybrid media landscape, in which they are challenged by multiple peripheral actors, the established news media have maintained or regained control. Addressing alternative media more specifically, this discourse is expressed first by systematically diminishing alternative media through characteristics such as “marginal”, “relatively small”, “little”, important only for “small groups”, “having a lesser position”, “niche” and “the wild west”. This position was particularly apparent in the Danish context where interviewees expressed a clear indifference towards the phenomenon of alternative media, not recognizing them as a player in the local context. In the Norwegian and Swedish interviews, the presence of alternative media was more acknowledged as a part of the larger phenomenon of peripheral actors challenging journalism. Thus, an aspect of the *we are in control*-discourse positions alternative media as a challenge and threat that have been largely overcome. Alternative media are talked about as something the editors were more concerned about “some years ago” and as a challenge they already have faced, become used to, and now largely cope with. As mentioned, for all three national contexts this is constructed discursively around “them” being relatively marginal and only important for smaller groups, but also in descriptions of journalism as resilient and having a relatively stable audience share and high trust levels.

There is also a clear temporal dimension to how they talk about alternative media across the three countries, referring both to the past and the future. Interviewees describe the challenge posed by alternative media as peaking around 2016, corresponding with the period where right-wing alternative media gained momentum in the years after the international refugee crisis, Brexit, and the 2016 US presidential election. This demonstrates that alternative media are good at capturing and taking advantage of broader shifts in popular opinion and meet the needs of groups who do not feel heard and included, and that issues important to them are not covered extensively by established media. In relation to this point, and even though the alternative media scene later has diversified, the news editors talk about it as being a predominantly right-wing phenomenon. The main message here is that—as of today—the editors feel confident that they have countered the challenge from alternative media:

Overall, and most important for me, is the fact that that we stand very strong. And that the growth [of alternative media] that we have witnessed over the last five years has stagnated. Their traffic isn't increasing that much. So, it's the editorial media that set the premises for public debate in Norway, and that is really important. (EDITOR 11, NO)

I would say that they have a relatively marginal position. They are important in specific groups and can have a very strong position there. But we have noticed in our brand surveys and measurement of audience trust that they are marginal compared to traditional news media. (EDITOR 1, SE)

Another expression of the perceived insignificance of alternative media is how interviewees talk about them as something that used to worry them or that they used to monitor and pay closer attention some years ago (particularly in Norway and Sweden). Most editors argue that their organisations aren't monitoring alternative media systematically in the same way as they follow what other established news media cover. Their editorial practices involve sometimes visiting these sites to see “what is going on”, but that

it's not high on their agenda (any longer). Here, a Danish news editor describe this development:

I think they have—as media—a relatively small role to play today (...) [Vaccine skepticism and anti-war critique] is not so much, as I see it, carried by the individual alternative media, but more by individual persons, who can have a much greater impact than those media. (EDITOR 20, DK)

Furthermore, asked directly whether they consider alternative media as competitors, most editors emphatically deny that this is the case. Extending the first discourse, alternative media are not seen as direct competitors for market shares, funders, subscriptions, or audiences, as exemplified by these quotes:

They are not challenging our business model [...] because I do not believe our subscribers are the same as those subscribing for [alternative media]. So, we cannot think of them as competitors. (EDITOR 10, NO)

We don't count them as competitors, but we count the platforms they often appear on as competitors. So, we count social media as competitors, and perhaps almost as the biggest competitor we have right now. But it's more the platform, than it is them. Because if [alternative media] all shut down tomorrow, then we would still have [social media platforms] as major competitors. (EDITOR 17, DK)

Even though alternative media are currently not considered to be a major challenger, there is also a clear ambivalence and insecurity about alternative media's potential role in the broader crisis of journalism. Editors specifically refer to the "distortion of facts" and "alternative facts" and most important, how the proliferation of actors producing journalism-like content may make it difficult for the audiences to distinguish "proper" journalism from other forms of communication. Although editors see this distinction as clear-cut, they do not trust that their publics understand the difference. Whereas some editors argue that it's primarily alternative media that distorts these boundaries, others see it as the result of broader digitalization processes where many people get their news on social media. Consequently, editors emphasize how they "have a job to do" convincing and educating people about what "real", "fact-based" and "trust-worthy" journalism is, and how it should be practiced:

This struggle is fought in the public, and it is the readers that eventually decide. If people stop trusting established newspapers, then that is what matters, and that is the fight we need to fight everyday. (EDITOR 12, NO)

You really must be transparent and specify genres. And the separation of opinion and journalism must also be much clearer in a digital reality than it has probably been so far. There also comes a huge challenge with AI [...] I meet a lot of people who can't tell the difference [...] and who do not necessarily regard an article from [our outlet] as more trustworthy than something peripheral. And that applies regardless of whether it is some small "opinion" media, or, in principle, it could also be fake news. I don't think people can tell the difference [...] So it's a huge, huge challenge. But I think that if we don't succeed, I don't think we'll actually survive as media. (EDITOR 22, DK)

It is important to notice how the metajournalistic discourse of control is strongly associated with an understanding of journalism as a method or process, whereas journalism understood as content or genre is seen as less controllable due to the perceived

inadequacies or confusion of media users in a digital world. Thus, one common suggestion to meet this challenge, as illustrated in the last quotes, is being more transparent about the journalistic methods and work processes.

The insecurities about the abstract (past and future) socio-technical developments are also where this metajournalistic discourse starts to overlap with a third discourse, which, in contrast to the two other dominant discourses, places alternative media within a narrative that poses a real challenge to the journalistic field.

### (III) We are under pressure

The third discourse is constructed around how alternative media is part of a larger cultural and political development that is predominantly described in negative terms. This is at one level connected to a destructive online culture that plays out on social media, featuring “polarization”, “echo chambers”, “conspiracies”, and “disinformation”. Interviewees stress that alternative media have been comparatively successful in mobilizing followers on social media platforms, and that the mobilization has a flip side as it is seen to nurture “hateful” and “noisy” public spheres characterized by “harassment”, “hate speech” and “racism” as illustrated by this quote:

They represent media that have legitimized harassment against individuals, which I consider very damaging. (EDITOR 10, NO)

In this way, alternative media are talked about in the context of increasing harassment towards journalists. This is particularly present in the interviews from Sweden where several examples are given of harassment targeting journalists with minority backgrounds and journalists that write about specific topics that function as trigger points:

One of our reporters who is originally from Syria, was labelled and “exposed” as an Islamist on one of these sites, in several articles. It happens a lot when we write about immigration and integration, and it has been like that for a long time. Recently, it has also been linked to the climate crisis, equality, and diversity. Questions like that! (EDITOR 5, SE)

Established news organizations have become more aware of the need to report serious cases to the police and to make a statement in cases of direct, severe threats against journalists and editors. Other examples of harassments from the interviews include how journalists have been reported to the social services for parental neglect by activists, and how journalists have become the target of confrontational reporting from different actors. Importantly, alternative media are presented as playing both a direct and indirect role in larger negatively connotated online cultures. Sometimes alternative media are described as being directly responsible, taking a leading role as “agitators”, pushing agendas, employing agonistic and activistic styles in their reporting, and fronting “campaigns” against commentators and journalists. Often, alternative media are however only related more indirectly and ambivalently to such practices. In this way, they are portrayed in different ways as belonging to a broader anti-mainstream or “populist” movement, the “far-right”, or, less specifically, simply “radical” or “extreme” tendencies that affect the debate climate in society in general and journalists’ work conditions in particular. Such associations are exemplified in this quote, where alternative media are linked to right-wing politicians, and where the overall debate climate is described as rougher:

I think that the entire debate climate has been affected, not only by alternative media, but also by the debate on the political right, which harmonizes. It has become harder. (EDITOR 2, SE)

This quote also indicates how alternative media are contextualized in terms of their followers and audiences, being described in other interviews as “their tale”, “their congregation”, “entourage”, “movement” and “underground”. Alternative media are, in other words, not only given responsibility for what they are writing and how they practice, editors also often hold them responsible for the behaviour of their audiences or supporters:

We can see that some of those people who follow some of these media are very active in our inboxes and in our live threads and everything like that. So, there is no doubt that we can feel that more people are getting their information from these types of channels. (EDITOR 21, DK)

It’s their “tale”. It doesn’t have to be an [alternative media] writer directly, it can be encouraged through publications about journalists, publicists, or media organization on these sites ... It’s agitation. (EDITOR 5, SE)

However, placing alternative media discursively within these broader cultural and political developments and associating them with for instance particular politicians or groups of audiences are also what makes alternative media worth covering journalistically as a cultural phenomenon:

They influence public opinion, and thus they come to influence the debate and the national agenda [...] It is also something that comes from the underground, but which becomes so large and voluminous that the established media also have to deal with it. (EDITOR 17, DK)

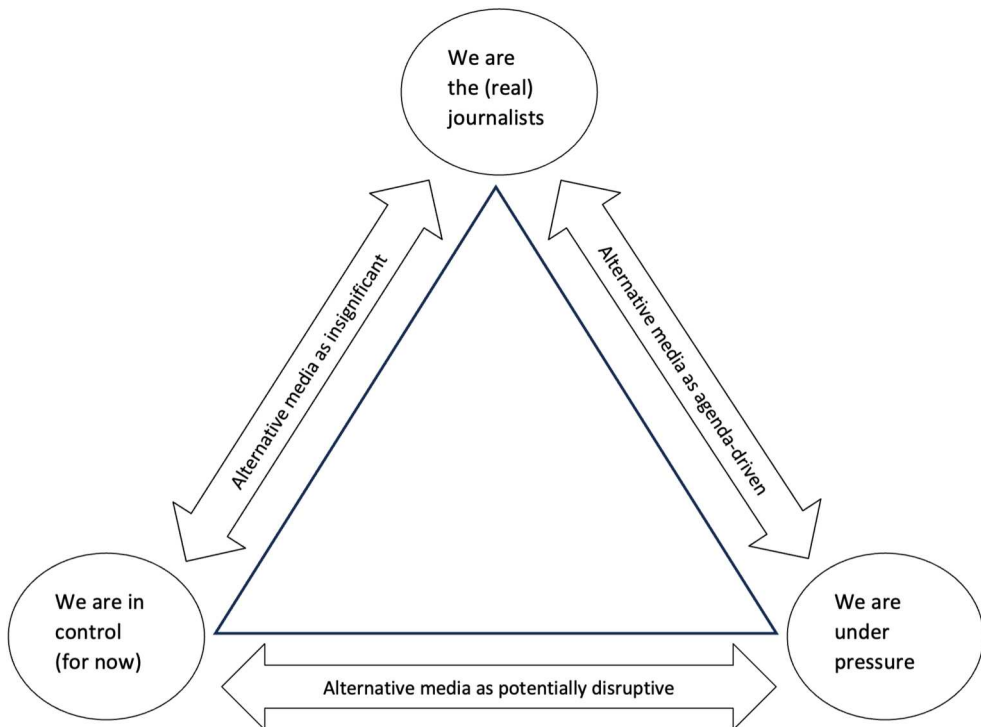
This perspective points to the first discourse raised, namely that although editors would rarely or almost never pick up stories from alternative media, they do pay attention to populist digital mobilization. Thus, when alternative media are associated or talked about as a political or cultural phenomena, more relevance and agency are attributed to them.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how legacy journalism responds to the emergence of alternative media in the Nordic region. Approaching journalism as a strategic action field, we place established news media, represented by news editors in this study, at the core of the journalistic institution (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). These incumbents aim to keep the field stable, and thereby to maintain their privileged position, through collectively defining proper journalism, marking a professional boundary between themselves and alternative media actors, and legitimating their own journalistic authority. Together the three main metajournalistic discourses identified in the interview data demonstrate the established news editors’ ambivalent relations to alternative news media as challengers (see Figure 1). By placing the discourses in relation to each other—and following the terminology of Carlson’s (2016) three interpretive processes outlined as our theoretical starting point—we can see how journalistic incumbents in a Scandinavian context generally: (1) define alternative news media as largely insignificant and agenda-driven actors, who are only potentially disruptive to

the journalistic field *via* their association with broader socio-technological and cultural developments; (2) place alternative media firmly outside the boundaries of journalism, which is conversely understood as having the features of impartiality and (tradition-based) significance as an epistemic authority; and, in this way, (3) delegitimize alternative media as incompetent and untrustworthy challengers to define the cultural practice of journalism.

As illustrated by [Figure 1](#), the *We are the (real) journalists*-discourse (symbolically placed at the top of the pyramid figure as a sort of “top of mind” and “top priority” discourse) are tied together with the *We are in control (for now)*-discourse by the boundary work that categorize alternative media as insignificant. As outlined in the analysis, alternative media are not seen as capable of competing with established news media in terms of quality, resources, and reach. Although they were considered to cause some instability to the journalistic field a few years back (especially in Norway and Sweden), or might do so in the future as part of larger media developments that “confuse” audiences ability to recognize journalistic practices and genres, alternative media are portrayed overall as “small” and “amateur” challengers in comparison with other actors, such as tech companies and platforms that (more legitimately or effectively) compete for audience attention and societal impact. Similarly, the *We are the (real) journalists*-discourse shares a boundary setting effort with the *We are under pressure*-discourse in categorizing alternative media as agenda-driven and thus ultimately untrustworthy. Alternative media are seen as unwilling or unable



**Figure 1.** Metajournalistic discourses connected by underlying perceptions of alternative media.



to follow established ethical norms and standards and are therefore not considered as colleagues or real journalists. In the case of the *We are under pressure*-discourse, this agenda-driven nature is even seen as inciting, contributing to, or sharing similarities with other forms of harassments that (increasingly) pressure journalists in their everyday work. However, while the categorization of alternative media as agenda-driven serves the purpose of delegitimizing them as “worthy” journalists and even worthy critics of journalism, it also sometimes legitimizes alternative media as (part of) cultural phenomena that legacy media needs to be aware of and cover journalistically, either to give a voice to certain recognition claims of social movements, report on socio-technical developments, or to warn against for instance anti-democratic tendencies. Following this, the *We are in control (for now)*-discourse and the *We are under pressure*-discourse share the above-mentioned elements of the other discourse-relationships that might leave a minimal discursive room for alternative media to be regarded as potentially disruptive to the cultural understanding of journalism, but only through broader media developments or cultural forces, which, in turn, also delegitimize an idea of alternative media as having distinctive, independent agency.

Following Carlson and Lewis (2020) typology of journalistic boundary work, we can see that the Nordic editors’ primary mode of boundary work is expulsion, that is, the boundary work where alternative media’s actors, actions and norms/beliefs/ideas are rejected as journalistic. But this basic typology of boundary work also allows us to see that the two discourses *We are in control (for now)* and especially *We are under pressure* are also constituted in the form of a protection of autonomy in that alternative media is to some extent perceived as a threat to journalism within these narratives. Importantly, not in terms of alternative media as *actors* in themselves, but in terms of the more indeterminate actions and norms that are associated with—or related to—alternative media as part of online anti-mainstream culture. While it is not surprising as such that established incumbents within a field dismiss challengers, the way that these different forms of boundary work can be associated with the different discourses tell us something important about the present situation of upheaval for journalism. The fact that the editors are more confident in engaging in the boundary work of expulsion when they speak of alternative media as specific (previous or present) actors, but turn to protection of autonomy when alternative media are considered as more “faceless” actions and norms in connection with broader media developments or cultural forces, shows how the editors are aware that they simply cannot ignore the transformative effects of the digital media environment and thus the present uncertainty around the identity and boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2020).

While we have focused on the shared understanding of journalism (Deuze 2005; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) and the clearly identifiable “common language” of the incumbents in the empirical context of the Nordic media model, we have also indicated in the analysis how certain (aspects) of the metajournalistic discourse are more prevalent in each of the three different countries under consideration. Thus, foregrounding that alternative media are “unethical” and “irresponsible”, positioned outside institutionalized press ethics, and repeatedly break professional norms were strong tendencies within the interviews with the Norwegian news editors. In the interviews with the Swedish news editors, the portrayal of alternative media as hyperpartisan, polarizing, and connected to the far right and extremism was dominant, while the Danish news

editors generally gave voice to the idea that alternative media is (an insignificant) part of a broader media development which blurs or confuses the public's understanding of what journalism is. However, as a particular case study within the larger discursive terrain of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016, 362), the similarity of the boundary work of the Nordic news editors in our study indicates that metajournalistic discourse around alternative news media does not lead to the same extent of opposing discourse positions between actors within the journalistic field as they have been described in analyses of for instance metajournalistic discourse around AI (Moran and Shaikh 2022) or fake news (Farkas 2023a). These studies, however, primarily observe these opposing positions between editors-in-chief vis-à-vis news reporters, which would be a relevant level of comparison to also incorporate in future studies of attitudes towards alternative media.

Overall, the core message in the metajournalistic discourse we have discussed is that Nordic established news media have bounced back against the challenges from alternative news media, protecting and reaffirming the core of the field and incumbent's existing positions of power. This may not be surprising, given the strong position of journalism in the Nordic region. The finding also raises questions concerning how journalists, and also researchers, frame the "threat" of alternative media. At the same time, the discourses also display some underlying longer-term concerns, indicating how alternative news media represent potential future field ruptures. First, alternative media may utilize specific events to boost their position, as was the case during the immigration crisis erupting in 2015, the US election, and during the Covid epidemic. Such events are often linked to broader shifts in public opinion and times of uncertainty. Consequently, incumbents must be aware of new windows of opportunity for alternative news media if or when the political and economic context changes. Secondly, the public's increasing confusion over what journalism is (not) can potentially make people more open to alternative news media content and other peripheral actors. Convincing audiences and other social actors about the authority and value of professional journalism has of course always been a necessary journalistic skill, but whether established journalism succeeds to mobilize support as a field in the future depends not only on its ability for collective response and action, but also to what degree alternative news media manage to utilize this vulnerability. Finally, it is worth noting that having a common enemy may also create an opportunity to strengthen existing alliances and distribution of resources amongst legacy actors.

## Notes

1. The project has been registered with the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) with project number 963218, and all participants have received a consent declaration form that they have signed or verbally agreed to at the start of the interviews, which have been recorded.
2. The interview guides for the three countries can be accessed via the data repository Figshare here: [10.6084/m9.figshare.26039236](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26039236)

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## Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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