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Counterpublic Discourses in Facebook Comment Sections—

A Comparative Analysis of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish (Social) Media Discourse on Islam

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Bodø, December 2020

Anders Nima Jafarnejad Lien

Abstract

The objectives of this dissertation are twofold: First, the dissertation seeks to contribute to existing literature on Scandinavian discourse on Islam by comparing Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish content on Facebook, a central arena for news as well as public debate. Second, it aims to contribute to existing literature on counterpublics as it attempts to analyse to what extent counterpublic discourses appear in mainstream news outlets' comment sections on Facebook. Existing research on online counterpublics has largely focused on (progressive and left-wing) counterpublic collectives in secluded communicative spaces, such as blogs, discussions forums, and alternative news sites. In contrast, this thesis analyses (both Islam-hostile and Islam-sympathetic) counterpublic discourses expressed in the comment sections of highly influential, mainstream news media.

A quantitative content analysis is carried out of Facebook posts (and associated articles) published by mainstream news outlets (N=602) and comments written by ordinary citizens in response to these posts (N=6797), in data from 2018. It is found that while the news outlets' Facebook posts depict Islam mainly positively, the user comments are largely negative.

While a majority of the comments are found to express a mainstream view, a substantial minority also engages in counterpublic discourses, contesting the bounds of established discourse around Islam in the Scandinavian public spheres. It is, however, mainly those who are sceptical of Islam and/or Muslims who engage in this agitational activity. Particularly the Swedish comment sections are found to be permeated by Islam-sceptic counterdiscursive comments, while this is less so the case in Denmark, with Norway in a middle position. I argue that different national contexts around Islam, immigration, integration, and national identity have created varying incentives for Scandinavian citizens to challenge the limits of the debate

through the online realm, thus leading to varying prevalence of counterdiscursive comments in the three countries' comment sections.

In light of the finding that both Islam-sceptic and Islam-friendly commenters engage in counterpublic discourses, the dissertation highlights the need to view counterpublics as self-perceived correctives to an excluding mainstream rather than as excluded per se.

Oppsummering

Denne avhandlingen har to overordnede mål: For det første forsøker den å bidra til eksisterende litteratur om skandinavisk diskurs om islam ved å sammenligne norsk, svensk og dansk innhold på Facebook, en sentral arena for nyheter så vel som offentlig debatt. For det andre tar den sikte på å bidra til eksisterende litteratur om motoffentligheter ved å analysere i hvilken grad motoffentlighets-diskurser opptrer i hovedstrømsmediers kommentarfelt på Facebook. Tidligere forskning på motoffentligheter i onlinesfæren har i stor grad fokusert på (progressive og venstre-orienterte) grupper i blogger, diskusjonsfora, alternative nyhetsmedier og andre arenaer mer eller mindre avsondret fra mektige offentligheter. Denne avhandlingen, derimot, analyserer (både islamfiendtlige og islamsympatiske) motoffentlighets-diskurser i kommentarfeltene til innflytelsesrike nyhetsmedier, som i stor grad preger den offentlige debatten.

Kvantitativ innholdsanalyse brukes for å undersøke Facebook-poster (og artiklene disse lenker til) publisert av hovedstrømsmedier (N=602) og kommentarer vanlige borgere har til disse postene (N=6797). Dataene er fra 2018. Avhandlingen finner at mens nyhetsmedienes Facebook-poster dekker islam hovedsakelig positivt, er vanlige borgeres kommentarer i stor grad negative til islam.

Selv om en majoritet av kommentarene uttrykker et mainstream standpunkt, er det et betydelig mindretall av kommentarene som inneholder motoffentlighets-diskurser. Disse kommentarene utfordrer grensene for etablert diskurs rundt islam i de skandinaviske offentlighetene. Det er dog hovedsakelig de som er skeptiske til islam og/eller muslimer som bedriver denne agitasjonen. Studien viser at særlig de svenske kommentarfeltene er gjennomsyret av islamskeptiske motdiskursive kommentarer, mens dette i mindre grad er tilfellet i Danmark, med Norge i en mellomposisjon. Jeg argumenterer for at ulike nasjonale kontekster rundt islam, innvandring, integrering og nasjonal identitet har gitt ulike insentiver for borgere i

de tre skandinaviske landene til å utfordre grensene til islamdebatten gjennom onlinesfæren, noe som dermed også har ført til ulikt omfang av motdiskursive kommentarer i landenes kommentarfelt.

Studien finner at både de som er skeptiske og de som er positive til islam formulerer motoffentlighets-diskurser. Derfor fremhever avhandlingen viktigheten av å se på motoffentligheter som selv-oppfattede korrektiver til en ekskluderende mainstream istedenfor som ekskluderte offentligheter per se.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In line with an international trend, researchers have noted that Scandinavians' trust in the established news media is low in relation to the topic of immigration (Andersson & Weibull, 2017; Moe et al., 2019). This is not equally the case for all citizens, however: those who are critical of immigration and who vote for radical right populist parties stand out with lower trust, both when it comes to the media's coverage of immigration and media trust in general (Andersson, 2018). Correlating with their low trust in the media and their negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, this group is also more likely to believe that journalists are biased (Moe, Thorbjørnsrud, & Fladmoe, 2017).

Citizens who experience that the established news media have severe information gaps, or perhaps even consider the media's coverage to be directly misleading, can become "alarmed citizens" (Moe et al., 2019, p. 153), who are deeply concerned with how society is evolving and who have a low trust in democratic institutions' ability to find adequate solutions. This may in turn prompt them to seek information and express their views in channels where gatekeeping may be less extensive, such as alternative news sites and social media. These platforms may provide substantial affordances for movements on the radical right (and the radical left) to engage in counterdiscourses that challenges a (perceived) marginalising and excluding mainstream, represented especially by the political establishment and the mainstream media (Neumayer, 2013).

Still, it is not given that oppositional individuals are content with staying within their own echo chamber (Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, 2013), where they only hear the opinions of like-minded individuals (Sunstein, 2017). They may also seek out platforms that allow them to formulate their ideas in proximity to mainstream publics, where they may be more influential. Unlike more secluded online spaces, comment sections below mass media content may be considered to

provide substantial affordances in this regard. Still, as pointed out by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015), researchers have typically focused on counterpublics as they appear in blogs, forums, or alternative online media, rather than in proximity to opinion leading mass media. By studying counterpublic discourses in the comment sections of established news media, this dissertation aims to contribute to scholarly literature by analysing such discourses in the online realm as they are formulated near a superordinate public, rather than in more isolated communicative spaces.

More specifically, this dissertation analyses to what extent counterpublic discourses permeate Scandinavian mainstream news outlets' Facebook comment sections around the topic of Islam. The debate on Islam is a central element of a larger debate around immigration, integration, multiculturalism, and national identity that has been high on the political agenda of most Western countries in recent decades, especially since 9/11. As we shall see in this dissertation, these debates have, however, been handled quite differently in the three, otherwise relatively similar, Scandinavian countries—Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012). Little is known, though, about how these differences manifest in comment sections hosted by mass media, where ordinary citizens can express their opinions for a potentially substantial audience to see.

General Description and Main Objectives

This dissertation examines how Islam is portrayed and discussed on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish Facebook pages administered by 15 established editorial news outlets. A quantitative content analysis is carried out of (a) Facebook posts and their linked article texts, i.e. items that the news media themselves have published and (b) Facebook comments written in response to this content, i.e. items written by ordinary citizens.

In the analysis of the posts and their linked articles, genres, themes, sources, and sentiment towards Islam are examined. The analysis of the comments mainly

centres around counterpublic theory, an alternative to the dominant deliberative tradition for studying political talk online. Whereas studies analysing deliberative norms in political communication online analyse to what degree communications fulfils certain standards of "deliberativeness" that facilitate an open and rational debate, the focus here is rather to analyse how the comment sections are used to challenge (what is perceived as) established discourses around the topic of Islam. The general sentiment of comments towards Islam, i.e. whether comments are positive, negative, or neutral, is also analysed. Finally, popularity cues, such as the number of "likes", are examined in relation to both posts and comments, the aim being to identify potential patterns with respect to the attention that different Facebook content on Islam generates.

The dissertation aims to contribute to scholarly literature in at least three ways. First, the aim is to shine more light on Scandinavian discourses on Islam by analysing how the subject is depicted and discussed on Facebook—a central arena for news as well as public debate. Few studies have comparatively analysed how Islam (or immigration) is depicted in the online realm in the Scandinavian context (for exceptions, see Andersen, 2019; Moe, 2019a, 2019b; Nygaard, 2019, 2020). Andersen (2019) comparatively analysed the Scandinavian immigration debate in Facebook comment sections from a rhetorical perspective, but no comparative study of Scandinavian discourse on Facebook has yet examined depictions of Islam.

Second, since this dissertation analyses comments discussing posts about Islam, right-wing counterpublic discourses may be prevalent. Scholarly work on counterpublics has traditionally focused on progressive and left-wing collectives, constituted, for instance, by workers, women, LGBTQ people, and ethnic minorities. With radical right-wing parties and movements gaining in popularity over the last decade (Lewis, Clarke, Barr, Holder, & Kommenda, 2018), it would, as pointed out by Downey and Fenton (2003), "clearly be a mistake to ignore the construction of right-

wing counter-publics" (p. 197). As argued by Holt (2018, p. 50), researchers have largely been reluctant to talk about right-wing populist, far right activists, or conservative criticism of the "politically correct" and "leftist" mainstream media using theoretical frameworks. This seems to be changing, however, as several scholars in recent years have shined a light on radical right-wing actors, for example by applying counterpublic theory (Cammaerts, 2009; Holm, 2019; Kaiser & Rauchleisch, 2019; Neumayer, 2013; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Törnberg & Wahlström, 2018). This study aims to contribute to this literature by examining counterpublic discourses around Islam, in three national contexts. The perceived threat posed by Islam and Muslims is widely highlighted by far-right actors, who often blame the political establishment and mainstream media for not taking this alleged threat seriously (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). Thus, to study content around Islam may be highly relevant when analysing right-wing counterpublic discourses.

Third, this dissertation analyses counterpublics online as they appear near a superordinate public in the form of established news media, rather than in isolated communicative spaces, which have been the focus of most previous studies (for exceptions, see Chan, 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018). For counterpublics to be able to break up consensual patterns in superordinate publics such as in the mass media, it is essential to engage with mainstream audiences and target them with "counterpublicity" (Asen, 2000, p. 441). Therefore, Facebook comment sections below mainstream media content are interesting spaces for discursive contestation, where counterpublic-minded individuals may have a particularly strong incentive to challenge larger and more powerful publics.

It is worth noting that rather than seeing online communication as something "out there"—detached from (offline) reality—online communication is here understood to be operating within the socio-political and historical context of the overarching

public sphere of a polity. This view is related to the counterpublic perspective, which sees counterpublics as part of a wider public sphere, rather than as enclaves (e.g. Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990).[1] Therefore, a chapter is devoted to addressing the contextual background of the study (see Chapter 2). At the same time, it is recognised that the studied platform, Facebook, features certain affordances that impacts what content is published by the actors in focus, both with respect to the news outlets (in the form of posts) and the ordinary citizens (in the form of comments). These affordances are discussed towards the end of this introductory chapter.

Research Questions

The objectives of the dissertation are reflected in the research questions. RQ1 deals with content published by the established news media, RQ2 and RQ3 focus on the comments written by ordinary citizens, while RQ4 addresses both posts and comments. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent do Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook posts and their associated articles about Islam differ (with respect to genre, theme, sources, and sentiment), and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

RQ2: To what extent do comments on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages differ with respect to the sentiment they express towards Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

RQ3: To what extent are comment sections on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages permeated by counterpublic discourses around Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

[1] As explained by Fraser (1990, p. 67), insofar as counterpublics are publics, they are by definition not enclaves. At the same time, she recognises that they are often involuntarily enclaved.

RQ4: To what extent do popularity cues correlate with different Facebook posts and comments about Islam, and how can correlations, or the lack of such, be explained?

The research questions have in common that they are designed to compare how Islam is represented and described on the Facebook pages of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news media. The research questions are mainly descriptive but also express a wish to provide explanations for potential differences. At the same time, they do not attempt to identify causal effects, as this is notoriously difficult. Rather, factors that are deemed *likely* to have contributed to differences are discussed.

Organisation of Dissertation

The dissertation has 8 chapters.

Chapter 1 has until now given a general introduction to the project and presented the main objectives and research questions. After this subsection has described the organisation of the dissertation, the chapter goes on to give a brief overview of the data studied in this dissertation, before it describes existing literature on social media discourse on Islam. Then, it considers the main perspectives in research on online political communication generally, before it gives an overview of research on comment sections, followed by a brief introduction to popularity cues. Subsequently, Facebook affordances are discussed in relation to the study at hand. The subsection on Facebook affordances also touches on the theoretical perspectives applied in the dissertation, the purpose being to give a brief introduction to these rather than a detailed account (which is the focus of Chapter 3).

Chapter 2 describes the fact that despite of the many commonalities between the Scandinavian countries, differences in how Islam and related issues have been handled in the three countries' public spheres have been rather striking. Socio-political and historical factors that are deemed likely to have contributed to these differences are addressed.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical and conceptual approach of the dissertation. The focus is primarily on counterpublic theory, both its foundations and how it is used specifically in this study. Relevant theoretical insights in the form of Hallin's spheres (1986) and corrective action (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Rojas, 2010) are also examined.

Chapter 4 opens with discussing relevant ethical considerations of the study. Then, data selection and collection are described, followed by an explanation of the methodological approach.

Chapter 5 is the first chapter to present results and discusses findings from the Facebook posts and their related article texts, i.e. the content published by the established news outlets. Comparisons between the countries are highlighted, but some attention is also given to differences between the types of news media included in the study (state-financed public service broadcasters, hybrid broadcasters, tabloids, and broadsheets). The findings are discussed in relation to the contextual background described in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus from the news outlets' posts to the comments written by ordinary citizens. Differences between Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish comments' sentiment towards Islam and their expression of counterpublic discourses are presented and discussed in light of the wider sociopolitical context, the theoretical approach, and the findings from the news media's posts.

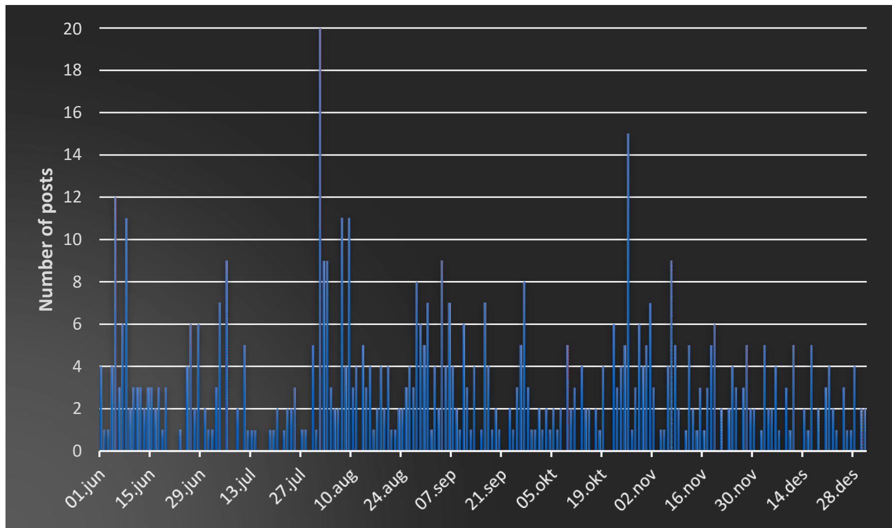
Chapter 7 examines popularity cues received by posts and comments and considers whether there are any patterns in relation to what content about Islam obtains such endorsement. The results are discussed in relation with the contextual and theoretical chapters.

Chapter 8 summarises the main findings and discusses the broader implications of the study. It concludes with addressing limitations and making some suggestions for future research.

Facebook Data on Islam in the Studied Period

This dissertation examines posts and comments about Islam published on the Facebook pages of 15 mainstream Scandinavian news media during a seven-month period of 2018. Search words related to Islam were used to identify relevant posts, from which a selection of comments was analysed (see Chapter 4 for details).

Figure 1.1: Number of Facebook posts about Islam published by the 15 Scandinavian news media from 1 June–31 December 2018 (N=602)



Relatively few posts were published per day (M = 2.81, SD = 2.82). While there arguably were no major deviations in the frequency of posts during the studied period, figure 1.1 shows a peak of 20 posts on 1 August, when Denmark and Norway implemented bans against face-covering clothing. Denmark banned such clothing from public space altogether, while Norway banned it in teaching situations, e.g. in universities and high schools. The second highest peak came on 26 October, when various outlets reported that artist Sinéad O'Connor had changed her name and converted to Islam.

Although it cannot be asserted that the selection criteria identified all relevant posts, the number of posts that focused on Islam seems to have constituted a

relatively low proportion of the total number of posts published by the 15 studied news media.

Table 1.1: Proportion of posts focusing on Islam from 1 June–31 December, percent (N=100,512)

	Norway (40,531)	**Sweden (35,209)**	**Denmark (24,772)**	**Total (100,512)**
Posts about Islam	0,3 (140)	0,6 (224)	1 (238)	0,6 (602)

As depicted in table 1.1, the outlets published a total of 100,512 posts in the studied period, and the identified Islam-related posts constituted only 0.6% of these. 1% of the Danish posts concentrated on Islam, while the corresponding figures for the Swedish and Norwegian posts were 0.6% and 0.3%, respectively.

We will return to the matter of data selection and collection in Chapter 4.

Discourse on Islam in Social Media

The voluminous academic literature that has examined how Islam and Muslims have been depicted in Western news media (e.g. Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Axner, 2015; Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Hussain, 2000; Said, 1997) has generally found evidence for negative bias. Some studies have, however, also found tendencies of more complex and positive representations of Islam and Muslims (Bleich, Stonebraker, Nisar, & Abdelhamid, 2015; Carol & Koopmans, 2013; Vanparys, Jacobs, & Torrekens. 2013).

In comparison to studies of traditional news media, relatively few studies have analysed how Islam and Muslims are represented in *social media*, but the research that exists indicates that social media discourse on Islam and Muslims is often negative. Most such research is located within the field of cyber hate and has actively sought to study anti-Muslim bigotry. For instance, Oboler (2016) in a study of 52 (more or less) explicitly anti-Muslim Facebook pages found that Muslims were recurrently depicted as threats to security, culture, and economy. The author also

found that the Facebook pages were used to promote threats and violence against Muslims (Oboler, 2016, p. 49). Similarly, Awan (2016) examined 500 separate tweets to "note and look at patterns emerging regarding online Islamophobia via the Twitter search engine" (p. 35), finding that words like "terrorists", "pigs", "paedos", and "scum" are frequently used to describe Muslims. Also, Copsey, Dack, Littler, and Feldman (2013), aiming to examine the "under-studied relationship between anti-Muslim hate crime and the far-right" (p. 5), based on a dataset collected by an organisation monitoring hate crimes against Muslims, observed that far-right groups were highly active in engaging in hate crimes in social media. Of the 300 online incidents of hate crime registered in the data set, the authors found that far-right groups were linked to 69% of cases (Copsey et al., 2013, p. 21).

Some studies have also looked at discourse on Muslims and Islam in online settings where it is less expected that negative attitudes will be predominant. Findings from these studies indeed find less negative, albeit not necessarily positive, portrayals. For instance, Ernst et al. (2017) studied 155 randomly selected user comments to YouTube videos created to counteract hate speech and found that the most prominent theme was "devaluating prejudices and stereotypes towards Muslims and/or Islam" (p. 18). This theme contained comments dismantling prejudice and stereotypes against Muslims and Islam, but also some comments that served to reproduce these prejudices and stereotypes (Ernst et al., p. 18). Similarly, Magdy, Darwish, and Abokhodair (2015), in an analysis of more than 900,000 tweets relating to Islam and Muslims after the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, found that while the majority of the tweets defended Muslims and absolved them from responsibility for the attacks, there was also a substantial minority of tweets that blamed the attacks on Muslims.

Some research has also considered the relationship between traditional media and social media discourse on Muslims and Islam. Törnberg and Törnberg (2016), in their

analysis of a 105 million word corpus of a popular Swedish Internet forum, observed that Muslims were portrayed “as a homogenous outgroup that is embroiled in conflict, violence and extremism: characteristics that are described as emanating from Islam as a religion” (p. 132). While the authors did not carry out their own analysis of surrounding traditional media discourse, they argue, based on previous literature, that these depictions are similar to, albeit more extreme versions of, portrayals found in analyses of traditional media. Thus, they describe the forum as an “online amplifier” that reflects and reinforces legacy media discourses around Muslims and Islam (p. 141). Similarly, in a comparative study of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish YouTube content on Islam, Moe (2019a, p. 2) report that “Findings suggest alignment to previous studies of mainstream news media coverage in the countries.”

McEnery, McGlashan, and Love (2015) also describe that the press clearly influenced content on social media in their study of newspaper and Twitter content about the 2013 London jihadist terrorist killing of British soldier, Lee Rigby. Still, they report a striking difference between the press and Twitter relating to the attribution of blame and the search for explanations for the attack: while the press tended to distance Islam from the killers and linked the killers to an extremist and misguided form of the religion, personal sympathy for the bereaved and the clash between the British identity of the killers and their acts seemed to be stronger pre-occupations of Twitter users (p. 256). Whereas anti-racist discourse was prominent in the press following the attacks, attempts by Twitter users to reframe discussions on the platform in an anti-racist direction faded over time (p. 256).

Overall, then, social media discourse on Muslims and Islam has been found to be largely negative. There is a difference, however, between the results in studies that have actively sought to study anti-Muslim content (Awan, 2016; Copsey et al., 2013; Oboler, 2016) and the findings of studies that have analysed (presumably) more

Muslim-sympathetic or neutral online settings (Ernst et al., 2017; Magdy et al., 2017). Also, existing research indicates that social media discourse on Muslims and Islam tends to be more negative than traditional media discourse on Muslims and Islam. Results are, however, inconclusive with respect to whether social media function mainly as an "online amplifier" (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016) or provides space for more alternative perspectives on these topics (McEnery et al., 2015).

Studying Political Communication Online—Main Perspectives

In an article published in 2003, John Downey and Natalie Fenton predicted that the relationship between new media, counterpublic spheres, and the public sphere may become central to questions of democracy and legitimacy in the coming years (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 200). It is easy to agree with their prediction today. Although their article was published less than two decades ago, these years have featured substantial changes in the media landscape. New media like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have been launched, offering vast amounts of communication spaces for billions of people worldwide. While these media have been used for many other purposes than to engage in political activity, political communication has become commonplace in various social and alternative media. Furthermore, malignant forms of online political engagement, what Quandt (2018) has called "dark participation", including misinformation, hate campaigns, trolling, and hate speech, has risen high on the political[2] and scholarly agenda (e.g. Anderson & Revers, 2018; Hedman et al., 2018; Gelber & McNamara, 2016).

Undoubtedly, the emergence of the Internet as an arena for political discussion has inspired a broad range of research questions. As explained by Wright (2012, p. 245),

[2] See for instance
https://www.nrk.no/urix/eu-velgere-bombardert-med-falske-nyheter-for-valget-1.14559825
https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46904935
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-fake-news-2019-election-facebook-cambridge-analytica-brittany-kaisar-eu-referendum-a9304821.html
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/politics/russian-interference-trump-democrats.html

the view that the Internet may "revolutionise" political conversation and debate because it, among other reasons, has been thought to have a democratic structure that would facilitate deliberative conversation, arose from the earliest days (e.g. Corrado & Firestone, 1996; Rheingold, 1993). Opposed to this revolutionist, cyber-optimist school is the so-called "normalisation" or cyber-realist school, associated with the work of Margolis and Resnick (2000), which holds that political internet applications are mainly used by already engaged and active citizens (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2011, p. 1). As Freelon (2015) points out, the cyber-optimism/pessimism dichotomy that formerly dominated this subject is avoided by the best current research, taking more nuanced approaches. The situation may indeed be described as "grey" rather than completely "dark" or "light" (Quandt, 2018, p. 37).

Still, two theoretical traditions dominate research on citizen communication online: one concerned with content production that studies to what extent online citizen communication live up to ideals of deliberative communication (e.g. Berg, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011), and a second consumption-oriented branch focused on selective perception and ideological fragmentation (e.g. Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Freelon (2015, pp. 772–773) argues that both are concerned with the same underlying democratic norm—deliberation—which commends a strict set of desirability criteria for political discussion (e.g. civility, reciprocity, reason-giving, and interaction with individuals with different political views). Therefore, research that examines the democratic consequences of political talk online has been developed largely against the backdrop of deliberative discursive norms, Habermas's (1962/1989) early work on the public sphere being the most common reference (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 465).

To broaden the scope of research, Freelon (2015, pp. 773–774), influenced by previous studies (Dahlberg, 2001; Habermas, 2006; Vromen, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen,

2001), suggests a multi-norm framework in research on online political communication. Besides deliberation, he proposes two norms that can be operationalised by researchers: a *communitarian* norm that advocates political action and which, like the deliberative position, commends civility, reason-giving, and reciprocity but only among like-minded individuals, and a *liberal individualist* norm, marked by the single-minded pursuit of uninhibited self-expression, generally at the expense of civility and responsiveness.

This dissertation does not operationalise these criteria, but is inspired by Toepfl and Piwoni's (2015) operationalisation of a fourth norm for analysing political communication online, namely that of *counterpublic* theory. This norm is marked by collectives engaging in discourses that challenges larger and more powerful public spheres. Counterpublics is one of the most discussed normative positions in the theoretical literature on the affordances of "digital democracy" (Dahlberg, 2011, pp. 860–863). Nevertheless, researchers have typically focused on (left-wing and progressive) counterpublics as they appear in blogs, forums, or alternative online media, even though comment sections in proximity to mass media content are potentially important arenas to study from a counterpublic perspective (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Here, counterpublic-minded individuals have the chance to directly challenge mainstream-oriented citizens and news outlets. In other words, comment sections may serve as highly fruitful grounds for agitation for counterpublic-minded individuals. The extent to which this is the case in Scandinavian comment sections, around the topic of Islam, is precisely the key focus of this dissertation.

Existing Research: Comment Sections

Since the advent of Web 2.0, characterised by the interactive potential of new media and online technologies, increasing scholarly attention has been devoted to studying comment features, both due to their prevalence and their ability to influence people's behaviour and opinions (Su et al., 2018, p. 3679). As has been the case with views on the Internet as an arena for political communication generally,

researchers have disagreed about the democratic value of comment sections. Comment systems online have lowered the threshold for (public) political engagement (Løvlie, Ihlebæk, & Larsson 2018a, p. 2), enabling uncomplicated ways for ordinary people to express their political opinions. They may also provide journalists with direct and potentially real-time feedback and indicate interest in a news item (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013, p. 125).

At the same time, while this study focuses on counterpublicity rather than deliberation, it is worth remark that studies analysing the quality of political discussions in comment sections have typically found that comment sections do not fulfil ideals of deliberative communication. Scholars have seen comment sections (and social media in general) as places where public discourse deteriorates (Løvlie et al., 2018a, p. 2), pointing to issues like the emergence of echo chambers and increased polarisation (Sunstein, 2017), "trench warfare" (Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk, & Enjolras, 2017), "flaming" (Hutchens, Cicchirillo, & Hmielowski, 2015; Santana, 2014), "trolling" (Binns, 2012; Hardaker, 2010), and hate speech (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012; Gelber & McNamara, 2016).

Moreover, as explained by Løvlie, Ihlebæk, and Larsson (2018b), there is a widespread perception among citizens that online comment sections are pervaded by harassment directed at certain groups, notably women and minorities (Gardiner et al., 2016). For instance, a report by the Norwegian Gender Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud (LDO) described that more than half of Facebook users chose not to participate in discussions on Facebook because the tone of the debate was considered too harsh (Burkal & Veledar, 2018). Comment threads about certain topics, particularly immigration and Islam, are often characterised as especially uncivil and polarised,[3] and they are frequently accompanied by discussions about

[3] See for instance
https://www.nrk.no/kultur/_-tonen-i-nettdebatten-er-et-demokratisk-problem-1.13797941
https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/PalGz/doemt-for-hat-mot-muslimer-i-facebook-kommentar

the normative boundaries in the public sphere (Ihlebæk & Thorseth, 2017, p. 140). Among those who choose to participate in online debates, though, Enjolras et al. (2013, p. 132) found that those who report often being hurt or sad because of online debate is only 4%.

Despite the widely recognised problems associated with comment sections, there is broad consensus among media professionals that mass media outlets should offer readers the opportunity to comment on news items (Nielsen, 2012). Both democratic responsibility to foster an open public debate and economic incentives of user involvement have been used as arguments to keep participatory functions (Løvlie et al., 2018b, p. 364). Moreover, it has been argued by Reich (2011) that a likely explanation for this consensus is that online comment sections do not challenge the journalistic authority in the same way as other forms of audience participation, such as public or participatory journalism.

At the same time, many journalists are critical of comment sections (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015), for instance because of the prevalence of personal attacks found in these arenas (Nielsen, 2012), and studies have noted how media professionals have struggled with the administration of comment sections (Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2019; Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015). Research has also examined how editorial control of these spaces are perceived from the users' perspective (Løvlie et al., 2018a, 2018b), finding for instance that users who are sceptical of strict moderation policies report being subject to editorial control more often than those who prefer stricter moderation policies.

There is also a range of other studies on comment sections worth addressing. For instance, researchers have examined to what extent people participate in

discussions in comment sections (Arkhede, Bergström, & Ohlsson, 2017; Reuters Institute, 2019; Rossi, Schwartz, & Mahnke, 2016). Findings show that this varies from country to country. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2019) shows that 20% of Swedes, 17% of Norwegians, and 13% Danes weekly comment on news via social media or other websites, while the average user percentage from the countries surveyed in the report was approximately 25%, suggesting commenting is less common in the Scandinavian countries than what it normally is in other places. The Scandinavian figures are, however, similar to those found in other Northern European countries.[4]

In the field of media psychology, scholars have found that content in comment sections can affect news audiences' perception of a topic, case, and even the perceived quality of an article (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; von Sikorski, 2016; von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016). A related group of studies has analysed whether, and to what extent, certain features of news items predict the intensity of commenting (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Tsagkias, Weerkamp, & de Rijke, 2009; Weber, 2014). For instance, Weber (2014) found that some news factors, such as *proximity* (news stories focusing on something "close to home", e.g. the nation) and *impact* (news stories describing an event having significant consequences for a defined social group or category), were positively related with commenting on news items. Conversely, *facticity* (i.e. providing a mere factual report on an event without further interpretation or situational analysis) had a negative effect on commenting.

Also, researchers have examined characteristics and motivations of the readers and writers of comments (Diakopoulous & Naaman, 2011; Kalogeropoulos, Negredo, Picone, & Nielsen, 2017; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015). For instance,

[4] The figures of the other Northern European countries for which stats were reported were Finland with 17%, Germany 14%, the Netherlands 15%, the UK 19%, and Ireland with 21% (Reuters Institute, 2019).

Kalogeropoulos et al., (2017), using data from a cross-national survey, describe that people who use several social media platforms and who use social media for news are more likely to comment on news outside social media; political partisans from both the Left and Right are more likely to share and comment, particularly on news stories in social media; and people who have a high interest in hard news are more likely to comment on news items, both outside and on social media (p. 1). Facebook to a larger degree than other social media is used by people with populist views compared to those with non-populist views,[5] and this goes for reading, sharing, and commenting on news (Reuters Institute, 2019). Enjorlas et al.'s (2013) study of Norwegian online debaters find a (albeit relatively weak) correlation between low social status and participants in online debates, including those discussing in comment sections: the probability of a person without higher education participating in online debates is 1.2 times higher than the probability of a person with higher education participating in online debates, and a person receiving disability aid is 1.4 times as likely to participate in online debates compared with people not on social support (p. 127).[6] The same study found that discussions in comment sections are dominated by men[7] and that the average age among discussants is relatively high (p. 126).

In this dissertation, particularly studies that centre on the analysis of the content published in comment sections are relevant (Andersen, 2019; Douai & Nofal, 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Freelon, 2015; Santana, 2019; Su et al., 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008). As we have seen, such studies

[5] Defined in the Reuters News Report as the belief in the existence of a "bad" elite and a "virtuous people" and the ultimate sovereignty of the will of the people.
[6] Only among those who debate on Twitter are those with higher education overrepresented (Enjolras et al., 2013, p. 127).
[7] Facebook was the only online discussion platform that was not found to be dominated by men (Enjolras et al., 2013). Since debates on news sites' comment sections, which are dominated by men, have been moved to Facebook since the authors carried out the study, it is, however, probable that this has changed.

have largely focused on the "deliberativeness" of comments and typically found these to have low deliberative quality, although there are variances across platforms and countries. For instance, Ruiz et al. (2011) found that the comment sections in two major newspapers in countries in which English is widely used (*The Guardian* and *The New York Times*) were closer to Habermasian deliberative ideals than those of three non-Anglophone newspapers (*Le Monde, El País,* and *La Repubblica*). Berg (2011), who looked at three different Norwegian online platforms for political discussion, found that the discussions on the platform with the most interventionist moderation policies had the highest deliberative quality, while the opposite was the case for the platform with the least interventionist approach (see also Jensen, 2003; Wright & Street, 2007).

Some researchers have also studied comment sections from other perspectives than the dominant deliberative tradition, some of which are of particular relevance to this study. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) used counterpublic theory and found that while German mass media painted the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) consentaneously negatively, reader comments generally expressed support for the party. Furthermore, Andersen (2019) analysed Scandinavian debates in comment sections on Facebook about immigration from a rhetorical perspective, finding that while immigrant-critical Danish commenters tended to speak from a perceived majority position, Norwegian and Swedish immigrant-critical commenters expressed their opinions from a perceived minority standpoint.

Popularity Cues

As this dissertation considers popularity cues that Facebook users assign to Facebook posts and comments about Islam, a brief background about popularity cues' meaning and function is also required. Porten-Cheé, Hassler, Jost, Eilders, and Maurer (2018) give an insightful account into popularity cues and explain that

popularity cues, such as likes and shares, point to mainly positive user reactions. [8] While there is reason to be concerned with manipulation of popularity cues, for instance by the use of bots aimed to skew citizens' perceptions of public opinion, the number of popularity cues generally indicate the degree to which people have assigned relevance to or endorsed online items, particularly in the context of political communication (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 210). This includes expressing a variety of affective responses such as excitement, agreement, compassion, and understanding.[9] Facebook itself describes liking a post as letting "people know that you enjoy it without leaving a comment."[10] Similarly, Twitter explains likes as something "used to show appreciation for a Tweet."[11] From an individual's point of view, liking a certain political message or opinion may present a low-threshold way to affect public opinion, first because one is aware that one's like adds to possibly many others and second, each additional like can contribute to lowering others' restraints to support certain opinions (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 213).

The share function on Facebook gives the platform's users the opportunity to spread content in their personal network. Similarly to liking, sharing content can be seen as a mainly positive reaction towards a (political) message (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). For instance, Bobkowski (2015) found that users share news they perceive as relevant for themselves as well as for their peers. Furthermore, because online peers tend to be part of the same socio-demographic group and have similar political attitudes, sharing can be an instrument for users to increase their reputation among (online) peers (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). The number of

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[8] While this study also looks at popularity cues in the form of newer Facebook reactions ("Haha", "Sad", "Wow", "Angry", and "Love"), likes and shares are prioritised in this subsection due to their more established roles.

[9] It is worth noting that likes may in some instances also be used for other purposes, such as for irony and parody (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 158) or to demonstrate to fellow users that one has read something (Gao, 2016).

[10] https://www.facebook.com/help/110920455663362?helpref=search&sr=1&query=like

[11] https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/liking-tweets-and-moments

shares may indicate how relevant a message was considered by previous users. Sharing, then, may serve to both highlight an item and to gradually affect what political issues other users perceive as important (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214).

While both sharing and liking content can be seen as mainly positive reactions, they seem to involve different degrees of cognitive evaluation (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). Compared to a like, which may be one of many and only be visible next to or below an item, sharing leads to the item showing up on the user's own Timeline, which means that it is more likely that others will notice the engagement and criticise the user. This can be connected to the fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), as studies have shown that group conformity dynamics can hamper the willingness to post content in public (e.g. Lee & Nass, 2002). Different from when liking an item, users who share may more thoroughly examine an item because they want to make sure the message is in line with the current debate climate (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 214). The wish to conform can, however, be neutralised if users are certain about their opinions (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010)—a relevant aspect given the counterpublic perspective applied in this study. From this perspective, users may want to share and like content that is perceived to challenge rather than conform with current public discourse or opinion.

Facebook Affordances

As we have seen, comment sections have opened for uncomplicated ways of discussing politics online but have been criticised for a number of elements, such as the prevalence of hate speech, echo chambers, and a general deterioration of civil discourse. In recent years, numerous news outlets have removed comment sections from their website in order to focus on maintaining sustainable spaces for discussion on Facebook. Media professionals and scholars have in this regard noted how Facebook pages and their associated comment sections have become an "inseparable part of the online news-consumption experience" for many (Su et al., 2018, p. 3679). Since this is a study of Facebook content produced by news outlets

(in the form of posts) and ordinary citizens (in the form of comments), it is useful to consider relevant affordances provided to these actors by the platform. In relation to the comments, the subsection particularly focuses on to what degree Facebook comment sections afford counterpublic-minded individuals a space to express their (oft-controversial) ideas.

Affordances can be understood as the action possibilities inherent in technological artefacts (in this case Facebook) that enable or restrict certain types of communication acts (Kalsnes, 2016a, p. 38). Both the news outlets and the commenters are provided certain affordances through Facebook, which may differ from affordances on other platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and (comment sections on) news outlets' main websites. As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the news outlets' Facebook posts can be said to adhere to a social media logic that differs from more traditional media logic, and ordinary citizens' commenting activity is influenced by affordances related to moderation policies (Løvlie et al., 2018a), identifiability (Rowe, 2015), and networked information access (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

News outlets

The Reuters Digital News Report (2019) shows that as many as 36% of Danish respondents, 32% of Swedish respondents, and 45% of Norwegian respondents regularly use Facebook for news. These user patterns mean that news outlets feel obliged, or are at least economically required, to provide and promote news on Facebook (Haim et al., 2019). By sharing content on non-proprietary platforms like Facebook and Twitter, news organisations generate traffic to their own sites, which generates advertising income (Sjøvaag, 2019, p. 91). The downside is that this also involves letting go of control (Boberg, Schatto-Eckrodt, Frischlich, & Quandt, 2018, p. 66). This is seen in, for instance, how media organisations sometimes struggle to understand why Facebook censors comments that editors perceive as legitimate (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, p. 950).

Because users and algorithms on social media such as Facebook prioritise certain content, journalists must follow certain social media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) in order for their content to reach potential readers. In a study of all public Facebook posts' texts published by 478 news outlets from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark during an 11-month period, Haim et al. (2019) examine the social media logics found in the Scandinavian countries. They compare the Facebook post texts to the respective news items' linked article's headline and teaser, the overarching aim being to compare social media logic to more traditional media logic.[12] A central finding of their study pertains to the varying prevalence of grammatical and emotive features in article texts and post texts. The article texts feature more numbers, which may indicate a larger focus on providing facts, and also feature more colons, dashes, ellipses, and parentheses, potentially indicating a more complex use of syntax than found in post texts (Haim et al., 2019). The use of question and exclamation marks, on the other hand, are clearly more common in the posts than in the related article texts and, predictably, so is the use of emojis (see also Hågvar, 2019; Welbers & Ophenhaffen, 2019).

Haim et al. (2019) suggest that the relatively frequent use of question and exclamation marks in post texts may be related to the job carried out by engagement editors (a form of audience-oriented editors). As explained by Ferrer-Conil and Tandoc (2018, p. 437), audience-oriented editors' job description differs from those of public editors and ombudsmen used by many news outlets, in that their main function is to match news content to the needs and wants of the audience. While the public editor or the ombudsman is tasked to react to

[12] As explained by Kalsnes (2016, p. 44), media logic refers to the "format, rules or 'codes' for defining, selecting, organising, presenting and recognising information as one thing rather than another. Media logic is often used to explain how news is selected, interpreted and constructed." Similarly, social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) is a model that frames "the ways in which the mechanisms of the social media platform impact social interactions and information selection among its users" (Kalsnes, 2016, p. 44).

traditionally qualitative audience feedback (e.g. readers' complaints), engagement editors, social media editors, and analytics editors (which all are examples of audience-oriented editors) are expected to be more proactive and make sense of quantitative audience feedback to be able to predict audience preferences.

The relatively active use of exclamation marks, question marks, and emojis in the news outlets' post texts compared to article texts—and the relatively infrequent use of other punctuation—may on the one hand indicate that social media logic is less related to grammatical use of language and more related to engagement features and calls for action (Haim et al., 2019). This underlines the potentially significant role of engagement editors for news on Facebook in Scandinavia, which has already been found in other countries (Haim et al., 2019). On the other hand, as noted by the authors, the findings could also reflect that journalists themselves are proficient in the use of features apt for Facebook, leaving little room to manoeuvre for engagement editors (Haim et al., 2019). Regardless, their study points to that Scandinavian news outlets adapt to a social media logic when posting content to Facebook.

Interestingly, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' post texts are more similar than is the case with the article texts, suggesting that the already homogenous news culture in the Scandinavian countries is even more similar when adapting to social media logic than traditional media logic (Haim et al., 2019). Also, since this dissertation looks at the most popular (Scandinavian) news outlets on Facebook, i.e. those with the highest number of "followers", it is worth noting that outlets with substantial reach tend to engage more heavily in the use of potentially more engaging question marks and emojis, whereas smaller outlets' posts are marked by most other forms of punctuation (Haim et al., 2019). As such, audience-retentive linguistic features of Facebook seem more prevalent among competing, national outlets (Haim et al., 2019). Furthermore, there are differences between

commercial and fully state-owned outlets' posts, the commercial ones displaying more prevalent use of almost all textual features investigated by Haim et al. (2019). At the same time, the fully state-owned outlets use emojis more often than the commercial outlets do (Haim et al., 2019), indicating that even the fully state-owned media organisations' journalists may feel obliged to market the news on Facebook (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

News consumers and commenters

Shifting focus to the audience perspective, it is of potentially high significance that there is a difference, as noted above, between the post texts and article texts. This difference means that individuals who consume (portions of their) news through Facebook may be exposed to different types of writing than those reading article texts: fewer numbers, more emotional content, and potentially less complex syntax (Haim et al., 2019). Moreover, as shown by Pak (2019), news organisations post different news on social media than they do on their own websites. In other words, whether someone gets their news through social media or a news outlet's website may also impact the news stories one is exposed to. Furthermore, as we have seen, news items on Facebook (and other social media) are accompanied with popularity cues, such as the number of likes and shares an item has received, potentially influencing how a news item is perceived by the user (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018). As pointed out by Haim et al. (2019), while heavy news consumers across a wide variety of channels are also often heavy social media news users, the above-mentioned factors may lead to forms of polarisation where news is not only perceived differently, but where different selection and writing style of news leads to, on the one hand, a more fact-oriented depiction of events in news articles, and, on the other hand, a more emotive and simplistic depiction of events on social media platforms.

It is possible that these factors may in turn impact how citizens discuss events in the comment sections of news outlets' Facebook pages, for instance making discussions

more emotional and less fact-based. This perhaps especially applies to debates around topics like Islam and immigration, which have been noted for being emotional, heated, and polarised (Brox, 2009; Eriksen, 2011; Hagelund, 2004a, 2004b; Stærk, 2011). At the same time, scholars who have comparatively analysed the deliberativeness of Facebook comment sections and comment sections on other platforms have found that Facebook comments are more deliberative than comment sections on YouTube (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) and comment sections on news outlets' main websites (Rowe, 2015). Differences in the affordances of identifiability and networked information access (in the form of automatic updates to friends' networks when content is generated) have been pointed to as potential explanations. As described by Halpern and Gibbs (2013), social media like Facebook afford more identifiability as users commonly use their real name and reveal a substantial amount of personal information in their profiles (although this depends on privacy settings), such as friends, pictures, previous posts, interests, education, and place of occupation. This increases the threshold for using aggressive and rude language, because there may be social consequences related to publishing such content (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013, p. 1166). Moreover, the networked information access afforded by Facebook, meaning that when you, for instance, write a comment on a public page on Facebook, such as that of a news outlet, your network may see your activity, may have a similar effect on people's willingness to post aggressive and rude content.

In line with spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), the affordances of identifiability and networked information access may not only inhibit people from expressing themselves rudely but also from voicing their opinions at all. From the spiral of silence perspective, people monitor their social environment for cues about public opinion on controversial political issues, in order to avoid expressing opinions that deviate from the predominant opinion (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 217). If people perceive their opinion to be unpopular, they may decide to refrain from

engaging in discussions that they fear may lead to social consequences. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there may be a lower threshold for voicing one's opinion in a public comment section on Facebook than in a public offline setting (see Suler, 2004).

From another perspective, in line with considering online media to provide affordances for counterpublics (Dahlberg, 2011), Facebook comment sections may provide fruitful agitational ground for counterpublic-minded individuals—citizens who perceive their views to be marginalised or excluded from a larger public sphere (Asen, 2000). After all, engaging in these discussions is an uncomplicated way of voicing one's opinion and may be considered a significant opportunity for criticising, challenging, and perhaps even convincing, mainstream-oriented actors. In combination with the counterpublic outlook, the corrective action perspective (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang et al., 2008; Rojas, 2010) provides a useful theoretical vantage point. According to this perspective, citizens who perceive the public sphere to be marked by certain "wrongs" will attempt to "correct" these by engaging in actions offline and online, for instance by partaking in demonstrations, calling a member of parliament, commenting on Facebook posts, or liking a comment. From this point of view, it is reasonable that a person who experiences the public sphere to be for instance overly positive towards Islam will attempt to "correct" this, for instance through voicing Islam-critical views in a comment section.

Still, even if counterpublic-minded commenters on news outlets' Facebook pages are motivated to take corrective action and are not victim to the spiral of silence, they may be restricted in other ways. Facebook's report function enables users to report content that violates the platform's community standards,[13] including harassment and hate speech. Furthermore, administrators of Facebook pages, for instance those operated by news outlets, also implement certain moderation

[13] https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/

policies. Violating these can get your comment hidden, removed, or lead to a ban from participating in future discussions (Ihlebæk & Kalsnes, 2018). Comments can also be automatically marked as spam and hidden from the page when using swear words if the page has turned on Facebook's profanity filter, which can be set to "medium" or "strong". Administrators can also filter out other words they deem unacceptable or that they know tend to appear in posts that violate their moderation policies (Ihlebæk & Kalsnes, 2018).

While useful for removing e.g. hateful and uncivil content, moderation may from a counterpublic perspective also exacerbate a sense of marginalisation if counterpublic-minded individuals experience that they are particularly targeted by it. For instance, in their study of user experiences with Norwegian news outlets' editorial control of comment sections, Løvlie et al. (2018a) found that those who write comments on the alternative, anti-Islamic news outlet *Document.no* were clearly more likely to report problems with editorial control than those who write comments on mainstream news outlets, many of those commenting on the anti-Islam site expressing belonging to a marginalised group in opposition to the mainstream, "politically correct", liberal elite (p. 14)—much in line with discourse used by anti-Islam/anti-immigration actors internationally (see e.g. Heft, Mayerhöffer, Reinhardt, & Knüpfer, 2019).

It is worth noting that moderation policies are not uniform across news outlets' Facebook pages, as media organisations' editorial strategies to balance professional control and open participation can be placed on a continuum between interventionist and non-interventionist/anarchic (Ihlebæk, Løvlie, & Mainsah, 2013).[14] For instance, news outlets involve their moderators to different extent in the comment sections: where some generally have a hands-off approach, others

[14] Even journalists of a single outlet may not share common rules when it comes to the moderation of user comments (Boberg et al., 2018, p. 66).

choose to frequently directly engage with the commenters, e.g. by urging people to debate civilly or to provide evidence for one's claims (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015).

Furthermore, there is a clear difference in what is accepted as legitimate speech by anti-Islam outlets and mainstream editorial outlets, and there are also potentially significant differences when it comes to how effectively news outlets enact their moderation policies. Regardless, the Facebook comment sections of *mainstream* Scandinavian news outlets, which are the focus of this project, does not, to borrow Hallin's (1986) terminology, afford a clear deviant sphere, although some extreme opinions may "slip under the radar". By deviant sphere, Hallin (1986, pp. 116–117) means those actors and opinions considered unacceptable by journalists and the political mainstream. This means that affordances in the form of moderation have a potentially substantial impact on the prevalence of counterpublic discourse found in the studied comment sections, as more extreme comments typically will be removed due to established editorial news outlets' moderation policies and/or violations of Facebook's community standards**.** More secluded online spaces, such as blogs, forums, and alternative media tend to afford space for deviant actors to engage more freely in counterpublic discourses, although deviant actors also operate on popular social media like Facebook, in various pages and groups.[15]

Overall, there are affordances speaking for and against the prevalence counterpublic discourses in the Facebook comment sections of established editorial news outlets. Generally, though, I would argue that, despite affordances related to identifiability, networked information access, and moderation policies, Facebook comment sections offer significant incentives for counterpublic-minded individuals to engage in counterdiscourses. As pointed out by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015), comment sections

[15] A relevant example is the public Facebook page of the organisation Stop the Islamisation of Norway (*Stopp islamiseringen av Norge, SIAN*), which is "liked" by approximately 30,000 users, and of which there are similar Swedish and Danish pages and groups.

as public spheres provide counterpublic-minded individuals with "excellent opportunities to pursue transformative aims in relation to the public at large" (p. 471), and they give three reasons for this.[16] First, in contrast to more secluded online spaces, such as discussions forums and alternative news outlets, comment sections are hosted on platforms of mass media outlets (in the case of Facebook, the comment sections are found on the Facebook pages of mass media outlets), meaning they are highly visible to a large, mainstream audience. While counterpublic-minded individuals see mainstream public spheres as narrow-minded and marginalising towards their views, mainstream arenas are also admired spaces to disseminate one's ideas (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019, p. 246). Second, despite limits on clearly deviant speech, compared to "letters to the editor", an earlier and related format, more citizens can express their opinions, with gatekeeping journalists and moderators typically allowing a significantly wider range of ideas and expressive forms to be published (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). Third, comment sections make it possible to engage in counterpublic discourses in spatial vicinity to specific hegemonic ideas as these are formulated in the mainstream public sphere (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, pp. 471–472). It can also be added that because the proportion of people who write online comments is relatively low (Reuters Institute, 2019), counterpublic-minded individuals can exert a disproportionately high influence on the discussions. Thus, they have a significant chance to shape (the perception of) public opinion (Duncan, 2020, p. 193).

For these reasons, at least, comment sections (on established news media's Facebook pages) can be considered a uniquely configured public sphere, which stands out from the many (sub)public spheres that constitute the public sphere at large. Therefore, counterpublic-minded individuals may have particularly strong

[16] Although Toepfl and Piwoni's (2015) insights are based on a study of comment sections on mass media's own websites rather than on Facebook, these principles also pertain to comment sections of news media on non-proprietary platforms.

incentives to engage in counterdiscourses in these arenas. As we shall see in the following chapter, the different Scandinavian contexts in relation to discourse on Islam may, however, provide different degrees of incentive for counterpublic-minded individuals to express their views in the comment sections.

Chapter Summary

We saw in the opening of this chapter that, in line with an international trend, low trust in the media is particularly prevalent among Scandinavians critical of immigration. For citizens highly critical of immigration and Islam, (Facebook) comment sections may, for instance because of the proximity to mass media items and the low threshold for getting one's opinion published, be a particularly useful arena for engaging in agitational activity. While moderation policies generally will restrict the most deviant forms of speech, less extreme, yet counterdiscursive, speech may find a home in the Facebook comment sections.

By analysing to what extent (both anti-Islam and pro-Islam) counterpublic discourses permeate comment sections in *proximity* to a mainstream public represented by the mass media, this dissertation aims to contribute to the scholarly literature on counterpublics. It also seeks to contribute to existing research on Scandinavian discourse about Islam by studying content on Facebook—an important arena for news as well as public debate.

The data consists of 15 news outlets' Facebook posts (and linked articles) about Islam and a selection of citizens' comments to these posts. The items were published during a seven-month period in 2018. In the analysis of the posts, genre, theme, sources, and sentiment towards Islam are examined. In the analysis of the comments, the prevalence of counterpublic discourses and the general sentiment the comments express towards Islam are investigated. Furthermore, the number of popularity cues is examined for both posts and comments.

While Chapter 1 considered Facebook affordances that may contribute to shaping what is published by the news media and ordinary citizens, the following chapter highlights relevant socio-political and historical factors that are likely to influence the findings.

Chapter 2: Socio-Political and Historical Context—Scandinavian Discourse on Islam

The second chapter of this dissertation aims to describe in what way, and for what reasons, the Scandinavian countries—Norway, Sweden, and Denmark—despite their similarities, have had strikingly different debates relating to Islam, immigration, and integration. Drawing on secondary literature, the chapter describes that the Danish public sphere has been marked by Islam- and immigrant-negative attitudes to a high degree, that critical attitudes to Islam and immigration have been a relatively marginal phenomenon in the Swedish public sphere, and that the Norwegian public sphere has been in a position between the two (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). In line with a similar systems design,[17] the chapter discusses potential contextual explanations for these differences emerging in three otherwise similar countries. As was noted in Chapter 1, the project does not attempt to suggest causal explanations for differences, as this is notoriously difficult and beyond the aim of the project. Rather, contextual factors that are deemed likely to have influenced developments are highlighted.

It is worth noting that, although this is a study of discourse on Islam, the topics immigration and integration are for several reasons considered relevant for this contextual chapter. One reason is that Scandinavian Muslims live in Scandinavia primarily as a result of immigration or being born by immigrant parents with a Muslim background. Another is that public discourse on immigration, integration, and Islam is often interlinked. It can even be argued that the word “immigrant” has become synonymous with “Muslim immigrant” in public discourse (Yilmaz, 2016, p. 59). Moreover, attitudes towards Islam and Muslims are tied to attitudes towards

[17] Most similar systems design is an approach to comparative research that “seeks to identify the key features that are different among similar countries and which account for the observed political outcome” (Landman & Carvalho, 2017, p. 74).

immigration; people who express negative views of Muslims also generally favour reducing immigration (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

The chapter begins by describing central similarities between the countries, reflected in their shared cultural history and welfare and media systems. It also describes how the Scandinavian populations have moved from being largely homogenous to more ethnically and culturally diverse. It then presents polls on how Scandinavians view Islam and Muslims. Next, it considers in more detail the quite different public, political, and media discourse on Islam, immigration and integration that has marked the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish public spheres. Then, the chapter discusses four contextual factors that may explain why and how these differences have emerged. Particular emphasis is put on the fact that radical right populist parties have had substantially varying influence in the three countries, and on how this can be explained. Towards the end of the chapter, hypotheses that are to be tested in the analysis of the Facebook posts and comments are formulated, in light of relevant Facebook affordances (described in chapter 1) and socio-political and historical factors (discussed in this chapter).

Norway, Sweden, and Denmark—Three Similar Countries

As described by Gripsrud (2019), the links between the Scandinavian countries go all the way back to Viking times, and political relations have existed through both unions and wars. The three languages have common roots in Old Norse, and people from the different countries can usually understand each other's writing and speech. As all three countries had Lutheran churches with strong ties to states/governments, public religious lives have been similar. Located in the northernmost part of Europe, the countries have relatively speaking been largely ethnically homogenous until immigration started after the Second World War (Gripsrud, 2019, pp. 131–132).

While the countries' populations have become increasingly religiously diverse, a common Christian cultural heritage as well as strong shared secular values remains an important characteristic of Scandinavian populations (Lundby, Hjarvard, Lövheim, & Jernsletten, 2017, p. 438). The shared linguistic and religious heritage contributed to clear similarities in the emergence of civil society, which again led to similar political developments. Religious and social movements such as temperance and other idealistic associations, professional organisations, and trade unions developed in all three countries, particularly in the last half of the 19th century, and a high organisation rate has marked all three countries. Most of these organisations established sub-public spheres with their own print media, meeting places, rituals, and festivities, but were at the same time clearly linked to the general public sphere through representatives in the national assemblies and media (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 132). Movements constituted by peasants', workers', and women's organisations were among those that made their way into institutionalised negotiations and contributed to shaping the modern state (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 17).

Especially crucial was the development of strong socialist/social democratic labour movements. These gained a stronghold in national politics in all three countries: social democratic parties typically constituted single-party governments from the 1930s to the 60s or 70s in all three countries (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 132). The Nordic welfare model (see the next subsection) was formed during this phase, with social democratic leadership in all three countries but with considerable cross-party support (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 132). The same was the case for public service broadcasting monopolies, which contributed substantially to building national cultural identity (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe 2014). Governments in all three countries also supported a variety of national institutions and practitioners of the various arts through ambitious cultural policies. The governments have, in principle, facilitated for the population to be able to benefit from and take part in academic and artistic activities (Gripsrud, 2019, pp. 132–133).

As explained by Gripsrud (2019), all these factors have been important in achieving high quality government and public institutions, and the countries stand out internationally with their low levels of corruption and high levels of social trust. Such traits characterise Scandinavia as a region and is a central part of an explanation for anything from relatively peaceful social relations, low crime rates, and general organisational, socio-economic efficiency (Gripsrud, 2019, pp. 132–133). A self-perception as liberal and open-minded is widespread in Scandinavia, and secularity is often taken for granted; less than 10% of Scandinavians have a strong religious self-identification (Lövheim, Jernsletten, Herbert, Lundby, & Hjarvard, 2018, p. 35). Furthermore, gender equality and small gaps between rich and poor are central values (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 13).

The Nordic welfare system

In his seminal book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), Gøsta Esping-Andersen outlines a typology of 3 models of Western welfare states: (1) a liberal (Anglo-Saxon) model; (2) a conservative (continental European) model; and (3) a social democratic (Nordic) model. He called the third model social democratic because of the social democrats' dominant force behind social reform in the Scandinavian countries. Rather than tolerating a dualism between state and market and between working class and middle class, the social democrats pursued a welfare state that would promote an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as pursued elsewhere (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 28). The Nordic model depends on strong states to provide public services and to redistribute income. In return for relatively high taxes, Scandinavians receive free public education, mostly free health care services, guaranteed paid leave from work for both mothers and fathers of infants, subsidised childcare, among other benefits (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 16).

Kildal and Kuhnle (2005) argue that although these programmes are instrumental arrangements, they also reveal something more profound behind the societies, as

the arrangements can be understood as expressions of principles, moral conceptions, and values. Brochmann and Hagelund (2012) describe the basic principles that characterise the Scandinavian welfare states as follows: (1) everyone must be entitled to benefits (universalism), (2) payments must not be random or smack of charity (the principle of justice), (3) there must be a connection between rights and obligations (the contribution ethic), (4) the strongest backs must bear the heaviest burdens (the distribution ethic), and (5) all who are able are in employment (the work ethic).[18] Also of vital importance is the centralised collective bargaining that characterises Scandinavian labour market policy, which over time has led to the most egalitarian income structure in the capitalist world and is a key driver of economic equality as well as productivity (Moene, 2007).

Since the early 1990s, a turn right in economic policy has left its marks on the welfare systems of both Sweden and Denmark (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 133). In Sweden, this shift is characterised by privatisation of areas like health and education as well as significant cuts in welfare budgets following an economic crisis around 1990. In Denmark, there has been an increasing focus upon “incentives” and the “deservingness” of recipients of welfare services—a system that particularly disfavours immigrants. While some of these pressures also apply to Norway, money made from oil has made the country able to maintain the original system to a greater extent (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 133). Wealth gaps, which traditionally have been relatively small, have increased over the last three decades, in Sweden more than in Denmark and Norway. This may increase the risk for social tensions, which counters the Scandinavian ideal of equality (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 17).

Due to immigration rising to unexpected levels in 2015 in relation to the so-called refugee crisis, the pressures on the Scandinavian welfare states have increased in

[18] Page number not cited due to the Kindle version of the book not showing the accurate page number.

recent years. Sweden is especially impacted, as it has admitted a particularly high number of refugees and asylum seekers (Furseth, 2018, p. 5). As described by Lövheim, Lindberg, et al. (2018, p. 182), the question of how to combine a situation of religious and cultural diversity with the core values in the Scandinavian welfare states of universalism, distribution, and egalitarianism is one of the most demanding challenges in contemporary Nordic politics (see Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012).

The Nordic media system

In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal study of media systems in Western countries, the Scandinavian countries are placed in the Democratic Corporatist/Northern Model, together with Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Other researchers have argued that the Nordic media system is sufficiently distinct to be considered a model of its own. For instance, Syvertsen et al. (2014) emphasise the distinct organisation of media and communication that has evolved in the Nordic region. Characterised by a publicly supported but independent press, the Nordic countries have boasted the world's highest readership figures. The strong public broadcasters have strived for enlightenment while maintaining a mass audience in the face of fierce competition. There has been political consensus around securing the whole population access to high-speed Internet services (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 1), and Internet and social media use is considerably higher in the Scandinavian countries compared to the EU average.[19] A strong adherence to the principle of freedom of speech has been combined with comprehensive state interventions and support schemes (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 1).

The outcome is a media landscape marked by a public media sector with a high degree of legitimacy existing alongside a domestically, and to some extent globally, successful commercial media and communication companies. The organisation of

[19] https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sv/statistik-fakta/mediestatistik

media and communications in the Nordic countries is characterised by a combination of four pillars: (1) universally available communication systems, (2) institutionalised editorial freedom, (3) the presence of an extensive cultural policy for the media and consensual policy-making, and (4) compromises between key stakeholders (Syvertsen et al., 2014, pp. 1–2). These organisational principles bear resemblance to the socioeconomic and political institutions that typically define the Nordic welfare state. Therefore, Syvertsen et al. (2014) argue that the Nordic media and communication systems can be described as a "Media Welfare State". This media system is considered a cornerstone of Scandinavian democracy (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 26).

Also, Brüggeman, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, and Castro (2014) in their revisitation of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology and dimensions for classifying media systems find the Nordic countries included in the study (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland) sufficiently homogenous to constitute a distinct (Northern) cluster, separate from the Central, Western, and Southern media systems. Brüggeman et al. (2014, p. 1056) describe the Northern cluster as characterised by highly professional journalism, an inclusive press market, powerful public broadcasting, generous press subsidies, and the lowest levels of ownership regulation and political parallelism among the four clusters.

While there is evidence to suggest that the Nordic media system is sufficiently distinct to constitute its own cluster, there are two differences that may be relevant for differences in public discourse generally, and public discourse on Islam, more specifically. First, Denmark has historically had a lower newspaper readership and a stronger position for local free (advertisement-based) newspapers. Second, whereas Denmark's leading tabloids *B.T.* and *Ekstra Bladet* are more similar to the German tabloid *Bild* and British *The Sun*, the Norwegian and Swedish tabloids have a tradition for "quality" reporting in certain areas such as political and cultural

journalism (Hovden, Mjelde, & Gripsrud, 2018, p. 331). Thus, they have been called “schizophrenic” newspapers—characterised by a balance of sensationalist and serious reporting (Eide, 1995). Hovden et al. argue (2018, p. 331) that “These differences suggest a somewhat more socially stratified public in Denmark and a stronger position for typical tabloid styles in public discourse”.

Nordic media have been relatively successful in preserving their agenda-setting positions in the face of growing influence from social media, streaming services, and global content aggregators (Allern & Pollack, 2019, p. 1431). Still, the Nordic media model faces some significant challenges. As explained by Sjøvaag (2019), public service broadcasting is under attack from private media operators across the region, circulation and revenue are declining in the newspaper industry, and advertising has moved to global actors such as Facebook and Google. To address (perceived) threats from globalisation, digitalisation, and personalisation, policy makers continue to support intervention to retain the mixed system characterised by the coexistence of a public media sector with high legitimacy alongside successful commercial media. Still, the Nordic systems appear increasingly vulnerable, and a movement towards economic logic and more segmented markets show that these countries are taking on features typically associated with other Western media systems (Sjøvaag, 2019, pp. 33–34).

The Scandinavian public spheres and freedom of speech

The distinct features of the Scandinavian (and Nordic) welfare societies influence these countries’ public spheres. These particularities are marked by state intervention, support, and subsidies in all areas of the public sphere: in addition to commercial news outlets and public broadcasting, churches, mosques, political parties, and NGOs each receive state funding—the purpose being to stimulate the public sphere (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 25).

Freedom of expression is considered a central principle for a well-functioning public sphere (Kierulf & Rønning 2009), and all the Scandinavian countries have enshrined the principle in law for more than 150 years, Sweden's 1766 freedom of expression law being the first in the world. The Norwegian Constitution has, since an amendment in 2004, required the government to facilitate an infrastructure for "an open and enlightened public discourse". Still, there are legal limits to the freedom of expression, such as hate speech, threats, harassment, and discrimination (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 25).

While none of the three countries have laws prohibiting blasphemy (Kühle, Schmidt, Jacobsen, & Pettersson, 2018, pp. 94–95), [20] freedom to criticise religion may in practice be limited by fear of violent backlash. As shown by Elgvin and Rogstad (2017), Norwegian journalists and editors are becoming more reluctant to publish content that may provoke radical Islamists. Furthermore, as was touched on in Chapter 1, online debates (around Islam and immigration) are (perceived as) so harsh and polarised that those who express their opinion risk being met by incivility and hate speech, which in turn may cause people to shy away from such debates (Burkal & Veledar, 2018; Hagen, 2015).

Increased religious diversity

The Scandinavian religious landscapes have gone from being (relatively speaking) largely homogenous to slowly growing more diverse, especially since the 1970s, and the privileged position of the majority Evangelical Lutheran churches has been contested. Denmark is currently the only country to have a state church, a liberal "folk church". Sweden dissolved its state church in 2000, while Norway cut the confessional ties to the Lutheran religion in 2012 and took further steps to separate

[20] Sweden repealed blasphemy clauses from the Criminal law in 1970, Norway in 2009, and Denmark in 2017. While Denmark's repeal came relatively late, especially compared to Sweden, no one in Denmark had been sentenced for violating blasphemy clauses since the first half of the 20th century. Attempts to bring the Muhammed cartoons to the courts for blasphemy charges were rejected (Kühle et al., 2018, pp. 94–95).

state and church in 2017. Registered communities, both religious and secular, are publicly financed in all three countries. Although such arrangements enjoy broad political support, some politicians hold that it should be possible to deny funding to communities that violate human rights (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 17). In general, the possibility for faith communities to be exempt from requirements in legislation, for instance related to gender equality and antidiscrimination, has become more limited over the years (Kühle et al., 2018, p. 97).

Furseth (2018) argues that the Nordic countries are marked by religious complexity, i.e. contradictory trends of secularisation and increased visibility of religion that are taking place at different levels of society. This includes a growing secularisation in the Nordic populations, both differentiation and de-differentiation of religion at the state level, a growing presence of religion as a topic at the political level, a greater visibility of religion in the media (i.e. a greater focus on Islam), and a de-privatisation of religion at the level of civil society (Furseth, 2018, p. 16).

Although a majority of the populations are affiliated with the majority churches, the Scandinavian countries are according to the World Values Survey among the most secular in the world (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 20). Secularism has been particularly strong in Sweden, where fewer identify as religious than in Norway and Denmark (Lundby et al., 2017, p. 444). Compared to in 1988 when 9 out of 10 Scandinavians were members of the majority churches (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 21), the corresponding figure was 6 of 10 of Swedes,[21] 7 of 10 Norwegians,[22] and 3 of 4 Danes[23] in 2018. The proportion of the population who practices rites of passage is declining and the same applies to the number of people who identify as religious. The disaffiliation from the majority churches can both be explained by

[21] https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik
[22] https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/faerre-medlemmer-i-den-norske-kirke--389588
[23] http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/folkekirkens-medlemstal/

changing views among the majority population and, not least, by increased immigration of religious minorities (Lundby & Repstad, 2018, p. 21). Particularly the Muslim population has increased, and Islam is the second largest religion in all the three Scandinavian countries (Furseth, Ahlin, Ketola, Leis-Peters, & Sigurvinsson, 2018, p. 51).

Scandinavians' Attitudes Towards Islam and Muslims

As noted previously, a self-perception as liberal and open-minded is widespread in Scandinavia. This subsection examines to what extent this tolerance extends to Islam and Muslims.

Generally, when compared to the rest of Europe, the Scandinavian countries appear quite tolerant. The Pew Research Center (2018a), based on a survey conducted in 15 Western European countries from April to August 2017, found that Sweden had the lowest score of nationalist sentiment, anti-immigrant attitudes, and anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment in the region. On a scale of 0–10, where 0 indicated the least nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-religious minority, the median result for Sweden was 1.2. The score for Norway was 2.5, the same as France. Only Sweden and the Netherlands (2.3) had lower scores than Norway and France. Denmark, with a median score of 2.7, followed next with the same score as Belgium. Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK had scores between 2.9 and 4.1, i.e. they were found to hold stronger nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-religious minority attitudes than the Scandinavian countries. Considering that Western Europe is more accepting of religious and ethnic diversity than Central and Eastern Europeans are (Pew Research Center, 2018b), the three Scandinavian populations, especially Swedes, can be considered relatively tolerant towards immigrants and religious minorities when compared to general European attitudes. At the same time, a particularly substantial proportion of Danes hold nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-religious minority attitudes. 25% of Danes scored between 5.01 and 10 on the Pew survey, which was above the Western

European median of 22% who received a score in the same range. In comparison, 19% of Norwegians and 8% of Swedes scored between 5.01 and 10.

Focusing on Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al. (2018) present a survey undertaken in April 2015, showing that Scandinavians express support for equal rights to practice religion but also scepticism towards public expressions of religion. Generally, Norwegians and Danes are more sceptical towards public expressions of Islam than Swedes are. More than 70% of respondents in the survey agree that all religions should be respected, and more than half of Norwegians and Danes and nearly two-thirds of Swedes agree that all religious groups should be entitled to the same rights in society. Still, while around 80% of Scandinavians agree that a cross, church tower, or other Christian symbol may be visible on buildings in public space, support for minarets being visible in public space is considerably lower: about 60% in Norway and Sweden and 56% in Denmark. Support for signs showing the location of a mosque is, however, higher (75%) (Lövheim, Jernsletten et al., 2018, p. 37).

Most Scandinavians are sceptical towards the hijab being worn by hospital staff, police, news presenters, and teachers, while a majority in all three countries think that pupils in school should be allowed to wear the hijab. Norwegians are more negative towards the hijab being worn in the above-mentioned public settings than Danes and Swedes are, while Swedes are the least negative (Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al., pp. 37–38). More Danes than Norwegians and Swedes, however, hold that "Muslim women who live in their country should *not* be allowed to wear any religious clothing" (22%, 19%, and 16%, respectively) (Pew Research Center, 2018a). At the same time, fewer Norwegians (26%) than Danes (38%) hold that Muslim women who live in their country should be allowed to wear any religious clothing of their choosing (i.e. also face veils). In comparison, nearly half of Swedes say that

Muslim women who live in in their country should be allowed to wear any religious clothing (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

More than three quarters of Scandinavians agree that religion leads to conflict rather than peace (Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al., 2018, p. 40). At the same time, a comparatively low proportion of Scandinavians, between 16% (Sweden) and 24% (Denmark), believe that the teachings of some religions promote violence (Pew Research Center, 2018a). The proportion who said the teachings of some religions promote violence and named Islam in particular was 8% in Sweden, 10% in Norway, and 16% in Denmark. The typical attitude was rather that some people (ab)use religion to justify violent actions (Pew Research Center, 2018a). Similarly, the proportion who said that all/most/many Muslims in their country support violent extremist groups was 11% in Sweden, 13% in Norway, and 18% in Denmark (Pew Research Center, 2018a). The percent of non-Muslims in Scandinavia who agreed with the statement "Due to the number of Muslims here, I feel like a stranger in my own country" ranged from 14% in Sweden to 21% in Denmark, while Norway was again found between the two neighbour countries (Pew Research Center, 2018a). 9 out of 10 Scandinavians are willing to accept Muslims as neighbours, while 8 out of 10 are willing to accept Muslims as members of their family. The percent who said yes was similar in the three countries. These answers, and the fact that the Scandinavian countries score relatively low on nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-minority religious sentiments (Pew Research Center, 2018a), seem to indicate quite positive attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, although as we have seen, scepticism towards public displays of (the Islamic) religion, such as wearing religious clothing, is common, especially in Norway and Denmark.

Other responses, however, seem to indicate more widespread negative attitudes towards Islam. For instance, 43% of Danes, 40% of Norwegians, and 34% of Swedes agree that Islam is incompatible with their country's culture and values (Pew

Research Center, 2018a). Similar, albeit somewhat higher, numbers were found by Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al. (2018) in response to the question “Do you consider Islam a threat to Danish/Norwegian/Swedish culture?”: 52% of Danes, 47% of Norwegians, and 38% of Swedes answered yes to this question. These numbers are high compared to views on other religions: around 11% of Scandinavians agree that Judaism is a threat to their culture, and 6% to 8% agree that Christianity represents such a threat (Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al., 2018, p. 41).

With respect to how Scandinavian attitudes on Islam and Muslims have developed over time, polls typically indicate that they have become less negative, although there are signs of a negative trend in recent years in Sweden and Denmark. In Denmark there is perhaps even signs of attitudes turning back to where they were two to three decades ago. Due to the lack of polls that compare developments in the three countries, the following paragraphs describe findings from relevant single-country polls.

Danish national election studies show that the proportion who agreed that Muslim countries constitute a threat to Denmark’s security in the long run declined from 68% in 1990 to 40% in 1994, before rising gradually to 48% in 2007 (Stubager, Hansen, Callesen, Leed, & Enevoldsen, 2016, p. 41).[24] As for responses to whether “Immigrants represent a grave threat to our national character”, Danish voters were in 1987/88 split in two, 48% agreeing and 48% disagreeing. From 1987 and until 2005 (except for in 1990) there were slightly more Danish voters who disagreed than agreed with this statement. In 2007 and 2011, the gap in favour of those disagreeing increased significantly, and in 2011 the difference reached a high of 22 percentage points. In 2015, however, the answers were more like those in the 1990s and early 2000s, showing a significant decline to 3 percentage points difference in

[24] The question was not asked in the following years.

favour of those disagreeing that immigrants represent a grave threat to national character (Stubager et al., 2016, p. 42).

In Sweden, 19% *completely* agreed that immigrants should have the right to practice their religion freely in 1993. This number reached a high in 2015 with 35% but declined in the aftermath of the refugee crisis to 26% in 2016 and 24% in 2017. This number is, however, still higher than it was before 2011 (Demker, 2018, p. 398).

Hellevik and Hellevik (2017) looked at Norwegians' attitudes towards Muslim congregations in the country, finding that while there in 1995 were 41 percentage points more who disliked than liked that Muslim congregations existed in Norway, the difference had shrunk to 6 percentage points in favour of those disliking Muslim congregations in 2015. In another study, Norwegian responses to the statement "I am sceptical of persons with a Muslim faith" did not display more negative attitudes after the 2015 refugee crisis than in the years prior to the crisis (Brekke & Mohn, 2018, p. 74). As such, while the polls of Swedes and Danes indicate a negative trend in recent years, a similar development is not found in the Norwegian population.

It is worth stressing that public opinion does not necessarily convert into public discourse. This has been particularly clear in Sweden; while 38% of Swedes consider Islam a threat to Swedish culture (Lövheim, Jernsletten, et al., 2018, p. 41) there has, as we shall see in the following subsection, only been marginal semblances of this in the Swedish public sphere. The following subsection describes Scandinavian discourse on Islam, the focus being on comparing the three countries.

Scandinavian Discourse on Islam

While the Scandinavian countries have had similar public religious lives, civil society development, welfare systems, and media systems, national debates around Islam and the oft-associated topics immigration and integration have been marked by noticeable differences. These are addressed in this subsection by drawing on previous research. Since this is a study of established news media's Facebook pages,

particular attention is paid to how Islam (and associated topics) have been covered in the mass media. Due to the comparative focus of the dissertation, the subsection mainly draws on the studies that have investigated differences between the three countries' media discourse on immigration and Islam (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Lundby et al., 2018), although insights from other important studies are also taken into account. In addition to media discourse, public discourse and political discourse is considered (although political discourse is mostly discussed in the next subsection in relation to radical right populist parties' influence in three countries). Towards the end of this subsection, recent developments are discussed in light of how the 2015 refugee crisis impacted national debates around Islam, immigration, and integration, notably in Sweden.

Most existing Scandinavian research on media and political discourse on Islam and immigration has been qualitative text analyses that have given valuable insights into the participants' rhetoric, discourses, and perceptions of the debate (Brox, 2009; Eriksen, 2011; Hagelund, 2004a, 2004b; Stærk, 2011). This literature has found that debates around Islam and immigration are polarised, emotional, heated, and that the participants often feel bypassed and misunderstood (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014a, p. 24), although this polarisation is a relatively recent phenomenon in Sweden compared to in Norway and Denmark (Eide & Nikunen, 2011). Relevant literature has also reported that a fierce criticism of the debate around Islam and immigration is that it is curbed by a "politically correct elite" who promotes immigration and multiculturalism as a societal good and hinders all critique and debate (Hagelund, 2004b; Hellström, & Hervik, 2014; Törnberg & Wahlström, 2018). From the other side, public discourse around Islam and immigration has been accused of being discriminating and racist (Gullestad, 2002; Mulinari & Neergard, 2017).

In line with the voluminous academic literature that has studied how Western media depict Muslims (and non-western immigrants) (e.g. Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Axner, 2015; Baker et al., 2013; Hussain, 2000; Said, 1997), most studies of Scandinavian media have found that the coverage is negative and serves to (re)produce stereotypes about Muslims (e.g. Axner, 2015; Horsti, 2008; Lindstad & Fjellstad, 1999, 2005; Yilmaz, 2016). Furthermore, studies have found that (religious and ethnic) minorities have been systemically underrepresented as sources in the media (Hognestad & Lamark, 2017; Madsen, 2005; Strand, Lindebjerg, & Bjune, 2018). Researchers have, however, also found tendencies of more complex media representations of minorities (Eide & Nikunen, 2011; Lindstad & Fjeldstad, 2010; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016), and that minority voices have been represented to a substantial extent (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014a; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Strand, Nervik, & Nilsen, 2016). Stokke (2012, p. 253) explains that Scandinavian debates on Islam have gone from being predominantly negative to acknowledging a wider range of voices to such a degree that some researchers argue that the public sphere has become multicultural. This is not only evident in newspapers, but in all kinds of media—films, digital media, magazines etc. (Lundby et al., 2018, p. 232). That said, this inclusiveness seems to be accompanied by an increased politicisation and polarisation, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Lundby et al. (2018) analyse how religion is covered in Nordic newspapers in 1988, 1998, and 2008 and find a growing interest in covering religion driven primarily by an increase in articles about Islam. Looking at the Nordic countries (including Finland and Iceland), the authors found that Christianity was by far the most covered religion during the period, but it declined from being represented in 78% of the articles on religion in 1988 to 61% in 2008. Attention paid to Islam, however, more than tripled in the same period (from 4% to 13%). This trend is more striking if one focuses on the more religiously diverse Scandinavian countries. The Danish newspaper in the study, *Politiken*, focused on Islam in 28% of its articles on religion

in 1988 and 58% in 2008. In comparison, Swedish newspapers covered Islam in 21% of articles about religion in 2008, which was higher than the 13% of Norwegian articles about religion that covered Islam. The percent of articles about Islam that were main articles (rather than middle-sized articles or notes) also increased in all the three countries, underlining the increased interest in covering Islam (Lundby et al., 2018, p. 205).

While studying the years 1988, 1998, and 2008 cannot necessarily conclude that any linear development is valid (Furseth, 2018, p. 327), the reliability of Lundby et al.'s (2018) findings is strengthened by other research. Hovden and Mjelde (2019) in their study of Scandinavian newspapers' coverage of immigration from 1970–2016 find that 15% of all articles on immigration in each country explicitly speak about Islam, with clear growth since the 1990s. After 2010, a quarter of all Norwegian and Danish items and one in five Swedish articles about immigration mention Islam (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, pp. 144–145). The politicisation of the issue is seen in how immigration increasingly has been treated as a partisan-political issue, a trend coinciding with the rise in national politician sources, decline in civil service sources, and growth in references to experts and media professionals (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, pp. 148, 154). The increasing political focus on Islam also been observed in Scandinavian parliamentary debates from 1988–2008, albeit to the highest degree in Denmark and to the lowest degree in Sweden, with Norway in a position between the two (Lövheim, Lindberg, et al., 2018).

There is also empirical evidence showing increasing focus on debate items at the expense of news items in the coverage of Islam (Lundby et al., 2018) and immigration (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). While one possible explanation for this is the general development in journalism marked by a shift from news to debate (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016), the significant increase in debate items may also indicate that Islam and immigration have become more contentious topics in the

Scandinavian public spheres. In 1988, 25% of articles about Islam were debate items in Denmark, while only 2% of articles were debate items in Norway and Sweden. In 2008, the figure was 57% in Denmark, 12% in Norway, and 27% in Sweden. Prominent issues discussed were the hijab and gender equality, ritual slaughtering of animals, holidays in the educational system, and other issues of accommodation, assimilation, and integration (Lundby et al., 2018, pp. 205–207).

Similarly, Hovden and Mjelde (2019) describe a Scandinavian trend marked by an increase in debate items in newspaper coverage of immigration: while debate items constituted one in five articles about immigration in the 1970s, this was true for more than half of the articles from 2010–2016. Interestingly, the authors find that while Norwegian and Danish newspaper debates have been increasingly marked by letters to the editor, the growth in debate genres in Sweden has mainly been in editorials and columns, indicating that Swedish newspapers have had a more restrictive gatekeeper role and to a lesser degree included ordinary citizens' voices in the immigration debate (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 143). Immigrants have been more prominent sources in the Swedish media than in the Norwegian and Danish media, however. They were a source in a fourth of Swedish articles about immigration from 1970–2016 and about in a fifth of Norwegian and Danish articles (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 148).

Important for understanding variations between the countries is that the Scandinavian newspapers frame immigration differently (Hellstöm & Hervik, 2014), i.e. they emphasise different aspects, which therefore highlights (or even impacts) their salience (Entman, 1993). To frame immigrants as victims, e.g. of persecution and poor living conditions, war, and racism, has been the most prevalent type of frame in newspaper coverage from 1970–2016 in all the three countries, but most so in Sweden. 71% of all Swedish articles contain a victim frame, compared to 52% and 40% of the Danish and Norwegian articles, respectively (Hovden & Mjelde,

2019, p. 151). There has been a growth in the number of items that, on the one hand, frame immigrants as victims in Sweden, a decline in Denmark, while there has been no clear trend in Norway. To frame immigration as a threat, on the other hand, has been much more pronounced in Danish newspapers than in Norwegian and Swedish ones. While around one in five Norwegian and Swedish items framed immigration as a threat between 1970 and 2016, this was true for half of Danish items (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 152). In fact, Hovden and Mjelde (2019) find that the threat frame, marked in particular by an increased focus on threats to social cohesion and public order, has been the dominant frame in Danish immigration coverage since the mid-1980s (pp. 153–154). Similarly, Boe and Hervik (2008) describe Danish media's dominant discourse on integration as "saturated with nationalist ideology that is used to define and manage who is included and who is excluded from the nation" (pp. 214–215).

As such, the difference between Danish and Swedish media coverage of immigration and Islam is particularly clear. Plainly illustrating the differences between Danish and Swedish (media) discourse on Islam, Hellström and Hervik (2014) found that while Islam was constructed as the primary threat in Danish newspapers, the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats filled this role in Swedish newspapers.

The differences between the three countries' media discourse on Islam and immigration are reflected in how national authorities have approached integration. The contrast between Sweden and Denmark is particularly evident, as the governments in the two countries have sought to raise their populations in different liberal projects (Brochmann, 2018, p. 93). In Sweden, the dominant view has been that the *majority* population should adapt to the minorities to facilitate a multicultural society within the frames of liberal democracy. In Denmark, however, it has been the dominant view that the *minority* population should be the ones to adapt and conform to the values and norms of the majority population (Brochmann,

2018, p. 93). Norway is in a middle position when it comes to ideology and policy on immigration and integration. Ambivalence has often characterised the Norwegian approach to these issues, at least until 2013, when the right-wing populist Progress Party entered government and contributed to taking policy in a more restrictive direction (Brochmann, 2018, p. 93).

In Denmark and Norway there is a higher focus on the duties of immigrants than is the case in Sweden. What are referred to as duties in Denmark are in Sweden consistently referred to as rights and incentives (Brochmann, 2018, p. 94). These differences are related to the different explanations that are given for challenges with integration: while Swedish authorities have highlighted structural discrimination and (troubling) attitudes among the majority population to explain problems with integration, Danish authorities have focused on low work incentives due to (overly) generous welfare arrangements (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012).

An illustrative example of how the different emphasis on duties and rights have marked the countries' approach to immigration and integration is seen in debates (and policies) on citizenship acquisition (Borevi, Jensen, & Mouritsen 2017). While Denmark since 2001 has moved towards increasingly substantial conditionalities and easier loss of nationality, Sweden has had a very liberal regime with few demands placed on applicants. Norway's nationality law falls somewhere in the middle, entailing both restrictive and liberal elements. While Danish debates on naturalisation have been linked to worthiness, cultural assimilation, security, and the view of citizenship as something sacred, which *should* be difficult to acquire, Norwegian debates have been less harsh and focused on that new citizens should be able to belong and have undivided political loyalty.[25] Similar debates in Sweden have been almost non-existent until very recently. No national symbolism has been

[25] Norway did not pass legislation allowing dual citizenship (except for in exceptional cases) until December 2018. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/apner-for-dobbelt-statsborgerskap-fra-2020/id2621497/

attached to citizenship acquisition, and naturalisation has been an easy, mainly administrative affair (Borevi et al., 2017, pp. 7–8).

These differences also characterise public discourse on Islam and immigration more generally. In the Swedish public sphere, Islam- and immigration-friendly attitudes have been dominant, and those who have raised concerns about the hegemonic discourse have typically been met with moral condemnation (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012). Unlike in Norway and Denmark, the idea of structural racism has been ubiquitous in Swedish public discourse (Andersen, 2019; Dahl, 2019). This is different from the Norwegian public sphere, where accusations of racism typically have been limited to describe marginal out-groups (Andersen, 2019, p. 204), and where general attitudes and practices in the general population has rarely been termed racist but rather “indecent” (Hagelund, 2003a, p. 258). The accusation of racism is substantially more excluding than accusations of indecency, as it places not only the attitudes of the Islam/immigration-critic but their very identity, “outside of social norms and socially acceptable behaviour” (Every, 2013, p. 679).

Differences in the Scandinavian countries’ public discourse on Islam can also be illustrated by considering freedom of expression in relation to Islam. While freedom of expression is considered a central element of a well-functioning public sphere in all the three countries, the countries’ debate climates around Islam have been marked by different understandings of how freedom of expression is best practiced. In Denmark, the sphere of legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986) around Islam has been extensive, meaning that few opinions and actors have been pushed into the sphere of deviance. This is a contrast from the more restricted sphere of legitimate controversy that has marked Swedish discourse around Islam. Danish debate on Islam has to the largest extent been marked by “absolute freedom” or “liberal fundamentalism”, i.e. seeing no limits to the freedom of expression, and viewing potential insults as educative towards the insulted, since they (e.g. Muslims or

immigrants) need to learn to "live with Western values". From this perspective, the best way to combat extremism is to open for all kinds of extreme opinions, even if they may be considered racist or insulting (Eide, Kjølstad, Naper, 2013, p. 188). For instance, studying discussions on the Muhammad cartoon crisis,[26] Boe and Hervik (2008, p. 231) describe (and strongly criticise) the Danish approach to the publications as "integration through ridicule."

Swedish debate on Islam and immigration has to the largest extent been influenced by the view that freedom of expression should be accompanied with tolerance, i.e. practicing "freedom with responsibility" or "liberal pragmatism", taking other people's sensitivities into consideration, but still defending the right to full freedom of expression (Eide et al., 2013, p. 188). Generally, strict norms for "decency" long marked Swedish discussions about these topics (Brochmann, 2018, p. 94). Corresponding with the limited room for legitimate discussions, immigrant- and Islam-critical actors have largely been ignored and silenced. This difference from the Danish approach is well illustrated by the different handlings of the Muhammad cartoon crisis. While Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Liberals) dismissed the idea that the publication of the Muhammad caricatures should have any political implications or reactions, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (Moderates) openly stated that he, as Prime Minister, holds a responsibility for securing mutual respect and peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Swedish society (Larsson & Lindekilde, 2009, p. 372). While Reinfeldt had the population behind him in his approach, the Danish government's reaction split the population into two almost equally large groups—one approving the strategy of "inaction" and the other viewing the government partially responsible for exacerbating the crisis (Larsson & Lindekilde, 2009, p. 372).

[26] The crisis began after the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons that depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad on 30 September 2005.

Norway's ambivalent middle position in these debates is illustrated by the intense discussions between proponents of a liberal fundamentalist take on freedom of speech and proponents of a liberal pragmatist approach. This metadebate was particularly central in the Norwegian public sphere after the Oslo extreme-right terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011, when Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, most of them members of the Labour Party's youth organisation. Where some argued for what Eide et al. (2013, pp. 190–191) labelled the *pressure cooker discourse,* others endorsed *the responsibility discourse*. The supporters of the pressure cooker discourse advocate that all opinions, including "unacceptable" (and illegal) ones, for instance hateful expressions on race or religion, should be heard so that they can be "debated to death". Often these proponents criticise the news media for being politically correct and excluding certain groups, notably radical right-wing voices (Eide et al., 2013, p. 191). In contrast, proponents of the responsibility discourse argue that allowing extremist voices to be heard can lead to a normalisation of these ideas. From this view, self-censorship or a degree of sensitivity is advisable (Eide et al., 2013, p. 191)

It has been found that the Norwegian media adopted a temporary responsibility discourse in the months after the 2011 terrorist attacks, as immigration was covered to a lower extent and also less negatively than it had been in the period before the attacks (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b). Furthermore, news outlets implemented interventionist moderation policies to regulate online user comments (Ihlebæk et al., 2013). At the same time, the attacks opened mainstream media debate to online, deviant anti-Islamic actors who previously were generally silenced and ignored, as these actors became highly newsworthy due to the fact that the terrorist had been active in anti-Islamic online arenas, and that there were calls to shine a light on the extreme ideology that had inspired the attacks (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b, p. 445). When giving these deviant actors a voice, editors were, however, generally careful to contextualise and counter these perspectives, e.g. by inviting

other guests to discuss the extreme view in television debates or by inviting other op-ed writers to join the conversation (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017, pp. 952–954).

Like in the other Scandinavian countries, (the limits of) freedom of expression was heavily discussed in Norway in relation with the Muhammed cartoon crisis. It caused significant controversy when then Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre (Labour) apologised on Arabic TV-channels *al Jazeera* and *al Arabiya* for the publication of the caricatures but said there was nothing he could do to instruct the Norwegian press.[27] While Støre met fierce criticism at home for his apology, many also thought that he had done the right thing. According to a poll, only a quarter of Norwegians completely supported publishing the Muhammed caricatures in January 2006. Five years later, in January 2011, a poll found that more than half of the population in retrospect supported publishing the caricatures.[28] In 2018, when social commentator Qasim Ali argued for banning caricatures of Muhammed, his views were criticised by political parties from the far left to the far right of the political spectrum.[29] As such, while the period after the 2011 Oslo terrorist attacks is a notable exception, there seems to have been a movement in both attitudes and discourse on freedom of expression vis-à-vis Islam in Norway, from a relatively pragmatist towards a more liberal fundamentalist stance.

Recent developments

While we have seen that Swedish discourse generally has been more amicable towards Muslims and immigrants than Norwegian, and, in particular, Danish discourse, the Swedish public sphere has been marked by a redefinition of the spheres of opinion (Hallin, 1986) following the 2015 refugee crisis, i.e. viewpoints

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[27] https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/4P48q/stoere-om-karikaturstriden-har-ikke-noe-aa-beklage

[28] https://snl.no/karikaturstriden

[29] https://www.tv2.no/a/10107577/

that previously were considered deviant have become legitimate. A growing number, even among mainstream journalists, have argued that there is some truth to the claim that immigration has been off limits for serious discussion in the Swedish public sphere for fear of being labelled racist (Truedson, 2016).[30] The Swedish public sphere has in a short period of time become more similar to its Scandinavian neighbours in terms of what is considered legitimate speech and the level of conflict that marks discourse on immigration and Islam (Brochman, 2018, p. 94).

The change in debate climate was spurred on by the high number of people who applied for asylum in Sweden in 2015. 162,877 people applied for asylum, compared to 31,145 and 21,315 in Norway and Denmark, respectively—which also in these countries constituted a massive increase from previous years (Hernes, 2018, p. 1312). In an oft-referenced speech from September 2015, Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven (Social Democrats), had stated that “My Europe does not build walls”.[31] In November 2015, however, less than three months after his optimistic speech, Löfven’s message had changed. He explained that it was no longer possible for Sweden to keep receiving asylum seekers to the same extent as before, and that policies unfortunately had to become more restrictive.[32] The Social Democratic-led government and centre-right opposition parties agreed on a broad compromise to address challenges associated with asylum and integration. This was followed up by measures such as restricting the rights for permanent residence and family reunification (initially for a three-year period) and a restriction in social benefits.

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[30] In Denmark, and in Norway to some extent, one has talked about “Swedish conditions” for some time—referring both to an unwillingness to debate issues related to Islam, immigration, and integration as well as the negative development in certain immigrant-dense areas of Sweden, marked by high levels of crime—allegedly caused by high levels of immigration.
[31] https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/3jxQ5d/mitt-europa-bygger-inte-murar-vi-hjalps-at
[32] https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/regeringen-utokade-id-kontroller-vid-gransen

Because of the crisis and the response to it, immigration and integration policies were pushed to the top of the political agenda (Hernes, 2018, p. 1305).

While the Scandinavian press' coverage of the refugee crisis stood out as more positive than the European press in general (Norway, and, especially, Sweden, more so than Denmark), humanitarian perspectives became less prominent as the crisis continued (Hovden et al., 2018). In general, the refugee crisis seems to have expanded the sphere of legitimate controversy by making immigrant-critical opinions more acceptable. As has been indicated, this was particularly noticeable in Sweden, whose largely mild debate climate in relation to immigration, integration, and Islam had been dominant prior to 2015. In the years prior to the refugee crisis, focus on negative aspects of immigration, especially related to (Islamic) culture, had largely come from the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats. Conversely, as a result of the refugee crisis lifting immigration and integration to the top of the political agenda, the two major parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party, started to compete over who had the most restrictive policies. Moreover, questions pertaining to religion, notably Islam, became more discussed in parliament as well as in the broader public sphere (Demker, 2018, p. 393). Reflecting the changed approach by political leaders, the Swedish public's attitudes towards immigration changed substantially in a negative direction from 2015 to 2016. The SOM Institute, which has mapped the Swedish public's attitude towards receiving refugees since the 1990, found that while 40% supported a more restrictive line towards receiving refugees in 2015, the number was 52% the next year—the largest increase since 1990 (Demker, 2018, pp. 393–394).

Summing up this subsection, we have seen that the Scandinavian countries, particularly Denmark and Sweden, have been marked by considerable differences with respect to discourse on Islam, immigration, and integration. Danish newspapers have increasingly focused on the threat posed by immigrants, while

Swedish newspapers have largely framed immigrants as victims (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). Similarly, while the Danish authorities have generally attributed problems with integration to a lack of incentives caused by the (overly generous) welfare state, Swedish authorities have highlighted structural racism and discrimination (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Brochmann, 2018). Variations are also manifested in different views of freedom of speech vis-à-vis Islam, where the "integration through ridicule" approach (Boe & Hervik, 2008, p. 231) has dominated in Denmark, while a liberal pragmatist approach has been leading in Sweden (Larsson & Lindekilde, 2009). On all these points, Norway has been in a position between its two neighbour countries.

In the following subsections, contextual factors that are deemed likely to have contributed to the different national debates around Islam and immigration are discussed. We start with the varying influence that radical right populist parties have had in the three countries. This factor is considered particularly influential and is therefore given substantial attention.

Radical Right Populist Parties and Their Varying Influence

No longer characterised by a stable five-party system (consisting of a communist/left-wing, social-democratic, agrarian, liberal, and conservative party), the Scandinavian countries have seen the emergence of not only Christian parties and Green parties—but also of radical right populist parties (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014, p. 215). Drawing on previous research, it is argued that the influence (or lack thereof) from radical right populist parties (RRPPs) and how established parties and news media have positioned themselves in relation to RRPPs (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Heinze, 2018; Strömbäck, Jungar, & Dahlberg, 2017) have been crucial for the different Scandinavian debates around Islam and immigration.

It is also discussed how the RRPPs have used (social) media to impact public discourse on Islam and immigration. Communication has been pointed to as a vital aspect of RRPPs success, and this has, among other things, been linked to the media's preference for, and receptivity towards, populist actors (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, the cultural and ideological gap between radical-right actors and mainstream editors and journalists has been particularly wide (Benson, 2013). In recent years, RRPPs have surpassed the social democratic party-family in becoming the most quoted party family in articles about immigration in Scandinavian newspapers (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019, p. 150). The right-wing populist parties' impact has also been striking in the online realm, where they, like other far-right actors, have been effective in using social media to spread their messages (Larsson, 2014, 2017; Lorentzen, 2014).

The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti, DF*), the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet, FrP*), and the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna, SD*), which today are the largest RRPPs in each of the Scandinavian countries, all emphasise national and/or Christian values and heritage in their party programmes and in parliamentary debates (Lövheim, Lindberg, et al., 2018, pp. 169–171.). They share a scepticism to immigration, driven both by economic and cultural concerns. Cultural concerns are expressed particularly in relation with Islam, which is considered a threat to national values and traditions. Having said that, there are variations between the RRPPs. For instance, the FrP has been described as a milder and less nativist version of similar parties elsewhere (Jupskås, 2015a, p. 83). All the three Scandinavian radical right populist parties' communication styles are, however, characterised by what scholars on populism have described as *complete populism*, which include (1) reference and appeals to the people, (2) anti-elitism, and (3) exclusion of out-groups (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, pp. 334–336).

In the following, the Scandinavian RRPPs are addressed on a country-by-country basis, focusing on their (lack of) influence on the politicisation[33] and culturalisation of immigration in their respective countries.

Denmark

Several scholars have noted that a shift in Danish public discourse on immigration occurred in the mid-1980s (Kitschelt, 1995; Rydgren, 2010; Yilmaz, 2016). Yilmaz (2016, p. 59) describes this shift as one from focusing on immigrants' social problems to their culture, which was primarily expressed in relation to the "Muslim threat". In this period, immigration as a threat to national identity became a central element in debates about immigration, and "immigrant" became synonymous with "Muslim immigrant" (Yilmaz, 2016, p. 59). From focusing on the "respectful integration of immigrants" and immigrants' rights in the early 1980s, the second half of the decade was characterised by a focus on the duties of immigrants, "refugees of convenience", and the "Muslim threat" (Yilmaz, 2016, p. 59). The Danish Progress Party (from which a faction of members in 1995 founded the DF) and related actors had a strong focus on anti-immigration themes in this period (Rydgren, 2010, pp. 58–63), and the populist far-right was essential in politicising and culturalising immigration (Yilmaz, 2012, p. 368). The increasing salience of immigrants' culture in public discourse was also reflected in opinion polls: while 23% agreed with the statement "Immigrants constitute a threat to our national character" in 1985, around 40% agreed in 1987 (Madsen, 2000, p. 87).

Because of a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers, from only 332 in 1983 to nearly 9,000 in 1985 (Jønsson & Petersen, 2010, p. 163), [34] this was an apt

[33] The term politicisation is here used to refer to immigration becoming an issue marked by antagonism between significant parties (Bjørklund, 1999, p. 139) and as an issue affecting how people vote.

[34] Denmark had prior to the increasing arrivals adopted a new Aliens Act (1983), which considerably liberalised the rights of asylum seekers. Several international observers at the time described it as the "world's most liberal asylum legislation" (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017, p. 99).

time for actors critical of immigration to politicise the issue (Rydgren, 2004, p. 492). The radical right populist Progress Party's anti-immigration rhetoric proved effective, as it coincided with the—from a Danish perspective—dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers (Rydgren, 2004, p. 492) and with a change in the type of immigration, from labour market immigrants to humanitarian immigrants (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012). The Danish media quickly started covering these trends, and content analyses have shown that they framed immigration largely as a problem (Gaasholt & Togetby, 1995; Hussain, 2000), with an increasing focus on immigrants' culture (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Yilmaz, 2016).

Although the politicisation (and culturalisation) of immigration became visible in public discourse in the mid-1980s, immigration remained a relatively insignificant influence on how people voted. While a high number of Danes started seeing immigrants as a threat to Danish national character from the mid-1980s (Madsen, 2000, p. 87), only 4% of the electorate mentioned immigration as the number one issue affecting how they voted in the 1987 election. In 2001, however, the number had risen to 20%, and about half of voters mentioned immigration as one of the most crucial issues affecting their decision about how to vote (Yilmaz, 2016, p. 60). The Danish People's Party (DF), which emerged as a much more stable and serious political actor than the Progress Party (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010, p. 415), was central in making the issue salient in elections (Rydgren, 2004, p. 481).[35]

As explained by Rydgren (2010, p. 61), the DF's frames around immigration became hegemonic in political as well as mass media discourse in the mid-1990s. Andersen, Larsen, and Møller (2009, p. 279) describe that the DF managed to launch a new

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Since then, though, the country has consistently implemented restrictions with regard to both asylum and immigration (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017, p. 99).

[35] The Danish Association, a far-right circle of intellectuals, also played a central role in politicising immigration (Rydgren, 2010, p. 63).

political project in the 1990s, which combined three elements: (1) maintenance and improvement of welfare rights and social security for native Danes, i.e. “welfare chauvinism”; (2) the re(invention) of a “nationalistic identity” politics (which increasingly focused on cultural and security threats posed by Islam after 9/11); and (3) the construction of ethnic minorities, in particular Muslims, as both an economic burden and a cultural danger eroding the cohesion of the Danish society. The DF has also been a vocal critique of the political establishment, which it blames for not being willing to preserve Danish traditions in the face of immigration and internationalisation (Bächler & Hopman, 2017, p. 33). Distinguishing itself from parties and organisations that the party considers to represent the establishment, the DF apply various phrases to them such as “the goodness industry” (Rydgren, 2004, p. 487) and “European(s) by heart” (Jupskås, 2015b, p. 31).

Crucially, the other political parties have been open to collaboration with the DF in order to gain office, which as we shall later see is in stark contrast to Swedish party-political dynamics, which has been marked by the isolation of the SD. It also differs from the Norwegian case, where the FrP was not accepted as a potential collaboration partner by another party until 2009 (Jupskås, 2013). In Denmark, the other parties adopted some of the immigrant-critical, anti-multiculturalist discourse propagated by the DF already in the 1990s. This was particularly the case for parties on the mainstream right-wing, especially the Liberals (*Venstre*). Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008, p. 610) argue that this can be explained by the mainstream right-wing parties no longer having any incentive not to prioritise the issue, as the immigrant-liberal, centre-right Social Liberals had joined the Social Democrats in government. This situation made it attractive for the mainstream right-wing parties to emphasise the issue in order to win government power based on the support of the DF.

The Social Democrats originally attempted to defuse the immigration issue, but shifted to a more restrictive position, albeit with significant internal disagreement,[36] as the centrality of immigration and integration on the political agenda towards the end of the 1990s became increasingly clear (Bale et al., 2010, p. 415). By joining in on the discourse used by the DF, the established parties revealed to the voters the influence and power of the DF and thus gave the party legitimacy (Rydgren, 2010, p. 64). During the 2001 election campaign, the Social Democrats and the Liberals, the two largest mainstream parties, seemed to fight to be most critical to immigration, and the DF was able to radicalise its stand further, a move aided by the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Heinze, 2018, pp. 293–294). The DF lent its support to mainstream right-wing minority governments in the periods 2001–2011 and 2015–2019, giving the party substantial influence on issues relating to immigration and integration.

With respect to the relationship between the DF and the media, the media's logic, notably its emphasis on conflict, has been shown to be conducive to DF's populist communication (Bächler & Hopman, 2017, pp. 35–36). For instance, some studies have found that Danish news outlets tend to describe the relationship between citizens and politicians as tense, with ordinary citizens as victims of the unreliable, reality-detached politicians (Hjarvard, 1999; Phillips, & Schrøder, 2004). Within such a media logic, there is significant room to manoeuvre for populist actors like the DF. Interestingly, Hellström and Hervik (2014) found that the journalistic language use differed between Denmark and Sweden: unlike the situation in Sweden, the DF was described as "one of us", i.e. part of the mainstream (p. 463). The authors also found that the media facilitated DF's Islam-critical communication, since the outlets did not really question the criticisms of Islam voiced by the party. An example of a

[36] Already in the 1980s, Social Democratic mayors from the municipalities around Copenhagen with a high percentage of immigrants had publicly expressed a need for a change of course. This led to the mayors generating increased support but also significant opposition from Social Democrats at the national level (Bale et al., 2010, p. 415).

study examining the extent to which the DF was able to communicate their messages through the media is one by Karpantschoff (2002), which found that in the second half of the election year 2001, Pia Kjærsgaard (the former leader of the DF), was the second most quoted person on matters pertaining to immigration, only beaten by the immigration minister. At the same time, other research contradicts studies that find that the media gives way to populist communication. For instance, an observed increased journalistic emphasis on the strategic motives of politicians might hamper populist communication reaching citizens unfiltered (Bächler & Hopman, 2017, p. 36).

From the perspective that the media might limit the effectiveness of populist communication, social media may represent highly valuable platforms for political actors, as they afford parties spaces for communication without the interference of the mass media's journalistic gatekeepers and filter mechanisms (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017, p. 1122). The DF was relatively slow in using social media strategically. For instance, a study of politicians' activity during the 2011 election campaign found that the members of DF had published by far the fewest Facebook posts (van Dalen, Fazekas, Klemmensen, & Hansen, 2015). This has, however, changed over the years: in the first half of 2018, the DF posted the third-highest number of Facebook posts, beaten only by the Liberals and the Alternative (a green party). The DF had the highest average of interactions per Facebook post, receiving 1.2 million interactions in total (likes, shares, comments, and newer reactions e.g. "Angry and "Sad"), half a million more than the following party, [37] suggesting that its supporters are particularly active on social media. Similar observations were made in the run-up to the 2019 general election (Larsen, 2019).

[37] https://politiken.dk/indland/art6720861/Partier-yderst-til-h%C3%B8jre-f%C3%A5r-mest-opm%C3%A6rksomhed-p%C3%A5-Facebook

The high number of interactions with DF's social media posts thus supports research that has argued that social media are highly advantageous to populist communication, for instance because it opens for a direct contact with audiences and gives more freedom (than in established mass media) for the use of strong language when attacking the elites and ostracising out-groups (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1123). It is also worth mentioning that DF in 2018 launched their own news site, *ditoverblik.dk*.[38]

As has been implicitly described thus far in Chapter 2, the sociocultural dimension (e.g. national identity and crime) has been particularly prominent compared to the socioeconomic dimension in Danish politics. This is considered by scholars to have boosted the politicisation of issues like immigration and integration in Denmark (Bächler & Hopman, 2017, p. 31). For instance, as explained by Ivarsflaten (2005), support for populist parties is dependent on populist voters being willing to prioritise other issues than economic ones.

Interestingly, Denmark is the only Scandinavian country where a party to the right of the existing RRPP has been able to gain parliamentary representation: The New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*), a party with an even more ardent anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim profile than the DF, surpassed the 2% threshold in the 2019 general elections. Furthermore, a party called Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*), which during the campaign had endorsed deporting all Muslims, came close to receiving parliamentary representation but in the end received 1.8% of the votes.[39]

Norway

Similar to in Denmark, immigration was politicised in Norway in the latter half of the 1980s and coincided with an exponential growth in the number of asylum seekers,

[38] https://www.mm.dk/artikel/politikere-satser-paa-egne-medier-uden-journalistfilter

[39] https://nyheder.tv2.dk/folketingsvalg/resultater
The election was held after the studied period, but these newer far-right parties were occasionally addressed in the studied Facebook posts and comments.

from below 300 per year throughout the 1970s and early 1980s to a peak of 8,613 arrivals in 1987 (Bjørklund, 1999, p. 140). As explained by Hagelund (2003b, p. 50), the significant increase in the number of asylum seekers caused problems related to housing and processing of applications, as there was no institutional apparatus in place to handle the high number of applicants. The situation was quickly reported on in the media, which described the "streams" and "flows" of asylum seekers coming to Norway (Hagelund, 2003b, p. 50), and public interest and concern over immigration became highly prevalent (Hagelund, 2002, p. 405). At the same time, the Progress Party (FrP) started to position itself in opposition to the dominant immigration policies. The party deemed these policies too lenient and brought the issue forward on the political agenda, aiming to rally electoral support. While the other parties sought consensus and considered it indecent to use immigration to mobilise voters, the FrP used the 1987 local election campaign to openly criticise what they saw as a privileged treatment of asylum seekers at the expense of Norwegians (Hagelund, 2003b, p. 50). This critique mainly had an economic basis: the money spent on asylum seekers was depriving "our own", notably the elderly and the ill, of critical resources (Bjørklund, 1999, p. 140).

Still, fear of Islam became a central part of the 1987 campaign in relation with the so-called "Mustafa letter". Then party-leader of the FrP, Carl I. Hagen, had during the campaign read publicly what later proved to be a fabricated letter from a man named Muhammad Mustafa, describing how Muslims would take over Norway (Bangstad, 2015, p. 57). Even though the party was met with substantial criticism from mainstream political and media actors, the FrP achieved its electoral breakthrough, receiving 12% of the vote (Hagelund, 2003b, p. 50). As such, it became clear that (Muslim) immigration was a highly potent issue around which electoral support could be mobilised. In the 1990s, this was reflected also in more formal contexts when the FrP began highlighting the cultural threat posed by immigration in party programmes and parliamentary debates (Hagelund, 2003b, p.

55). While several Norwegian parties have since strongly emphasised the challenge of immigration for the economic sustainability of the welfare state, the FrP has largely been alone in considering Muslim immigration a threat to Norwegian values and culture (Fangen & Vaage, 2018, pp. 466–467).

Similarly to its Danish sister party, the FrP's foundation as an anti-tax movement has provided a solid "reputational shield", enabling the party to effectively dismiss most accusations of racism (Ivarsflaten, 2006). Moreover, the success of the FrP has by some been considerably attributed to the party leaders' effective communication style. For instance, Bjørklund (2004) points to Hagen's rhetorical skills, characterised by e.g. double communication and the use of unarticulated conclusions, which allow audiences to interpret the message based on their own prejudices. Siv Jensen, who took over as leader after Hagen in 2006, has also been observed to hold similar rhetorical skills, in that she tends to be vague, ambiguous, and non-specific in her argumentation (Sigurdsen, 2014). As pointed out by Jupskås (2015a), the party leaders have been highly controversial externally yet highly popular among the core followers of the party, who view them as unafraid, honest, and responsive.

Like the other Scandinavian RRPPs, the FrP is characterised by *complete populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, pp. 334–336). This is reflected in how it frequently portrays itself as the lone defender of the "common people," criticises elites (such as "mainstream" politicians, bureaucrats, cultural practitioners, media professionals, and academics) and excludes various minority groups from the national community, notably Muslims and asylum seekers (Jupskås, Ivarsflaten, Kalsnes, & Aalberg, 2017, p. 57).

Politicians from other parties have historically been highly critical of the party's immigration policies and rhetoric (Hagelund, 2003b, p. 52).[40] Still, the FrP has been

[40] The party has also been consistently criticised by most civil society organisations, trade union elites, and leaders within the majority church (Jupskås, 2015, p. 31).

part of a coalition government since 2013 and has not been shunned by the other parties in the way that the SD has in Sweden (Jupskås, 2015b) (see the ensuing subsection for more about the SD's position). Having said that, the FrP was not accepted as a legitimate governing partner by the other parties for many years (Jupskås, 2015b). The Conservatives helped to marginalise the FrP and to defuse their issues by enabling broad cross-party consensus on immigration and integration, unlike in Denmark where the mainstream right parties adopted DF's agenda (Bale et al., 2010, p. 421).

In 2009, the Conservatives announced for the first time that they were open to governing with the FrP, and in 2012, two centrist parties, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats, followed suit—albeit also somewhat reluctantly (Jupskås, 2013). Lending their support to the government in the period 2013–2017, these parties hesitated until 2018 (the Liberals) and 2019 (the Christian Democrats) to join the government with the FrP and the Conservatives, because they deemed the ideological differences to the FrP to be too substantial. The gap between the coalition parties on matters pertaining to Islam and immigration continued to manifest during the governing period. For instance, when Jensen in 2019 again used the term "sneak Islamisation" (she had originally used the term in 2009) to describe the development in Norwegian society, this triggered a (more or less) significant backlash from FrP's coalition partners, including the Conservatives.[41] Illustratively, it was a disagreement pertaining to how to deal with a woman who had travelled to ISIS-controlled territory that led to the FrP's exit from the government in January 2020.[42]

As in the case with the DF in Denmark, the media's focus on how individual citizens are victims of "the system" may have benefitted a populist party like the FrP

[41] https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/zGX9j5/jensen-nekter-aa-slutte-med-begrepet-snikislamisering
[42] https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/rAKMaK/fremskrittspartiet-gaar-ut-av-regjeringen

(Jupskås, 2015a, p. 31). At the same time, very few journalists seem to vote for the party,[43] and political commentators have largely been critical of the party's immigration policies and rhetoric. Analysing Scandinavian newspapers' editorials from 2009–2012, Meret, Hellström, and Hagelund (2016) found that the tone towards the FrP was generally negative.[44] Faced with such opposition, blaming the media for being biased (and other political parties for not wanting, or not "having the guts", to discuss Islam and immigration) has proven to be a successful rhetorical strategy (Jupskås, 2015a, p. 90).

While the FrP was the last Norwegian party to use social media strategically (Kalnes, 2009), it has later seen social media, especially Facebook, as an effective tool to get the party's messages across to the electorate (Kalsnes, 2019, p. 201). The FrP prioritises Facebook, which is the most popular social media platform in Norway, over other social networks. A part of the explanation for this preference is the combination of image, text, and major network of followers (Kalsnes, 2019, p. 193). Furthermore, Twitter is (in the Norwegian context) characterised by more urban, liberal, and pro-immigration individuals (Enjorlas et al., 2013), meaning the FrP may see a bigger benefit in focusing its attention on Facebook. Research indicates that the FrP embraces social media logic to a higher extent than other parties, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, includes the frequent use of question marks to engage audiences. For instance, they frequently ask followers "Do you agree?", "What do you think?", and encourage them to comment or "like and share".[45]

[43] https://journalisten.no/arbeiderpartiet-bergen-erik-knudsen/slik-stemmer-norske-journalister--forsvinner-fra-hoyresiden/362728

[44] But the editorials were noticeably more balanced than Swedish newspapers' editorials about the Sweden Democrats. The Danish newspapers' editorials were the least negative towards the right-wing populist party, but also in the Danish case a majority of editorials were negative (Meret et al., 2016, p. 121).

[45] Kalsnes describes these findings in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper *Dagsavisen*: https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/sv-og-frp-poster-mest-om-innvandring-pa-facebook-1.1187675

At the time of writing, the FrP is the Norwegian party with the highest number of likes on its Facebook page, and it has been found to generate substantially more interactions through its Facebook posts about immigration and integration than other Norwegian parties have through their posts about the same themes. Furthermore, compared to other parties, the FrP are particularly active in responding to comments left by ordinary citizens on their Facebook page (Kalsnes, 2016b, p. 6), which is a part of its social media strategy (Kalsnes, 2019, p. 201).

Overall, the FrP has punched above its weight in social media. The party's use of social media has, however, not only been a success story. The prime example of this is a 2018 Facebook post by then Minister of Justice, Sylvi Listhaug, in which she published a picture of ISIS terrorists accompanied with a text accusing the Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) of thinking that "The rights of terrorists are more important than national security", which eventually ended in her having to withdraw from her position as Minister of Justice.[46] The post was considered particularly troubling because of the 2011 terrorist attack on the island of Utøya, where the terrorist targeted and killed members of the AUF, the youth organisation affiliated with the Labour Party. At the same time, Listhaug received a sea of flowers from fans who meant she had been wrongly treated by the political establishment and mainstream media.[47]

Being in government position from 2013–2020, the FrP has tried to balance being a part of a coalition government with its image as an "outsider" that challenges what it sees as the consensus-oriented discourse and policies related to immigration, integration and Islam advocated by the other parties (Fangen & Vaage, 2018).

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[46] https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/ber-politikerne-skjerpe-seg-etter-listhaug-braket---na-er-det-nok/69634642

[47] https://www.nrk.no/norge/listhaug-viste-fram-blomsterstotten-_-journalister-fikk-ikke-stille-kritiske-sporsmal-1.13965833

Sweden

While radical right populist parties (RRPPs) in Denmark and Norway achieved substantial electoral support by problematising immigration and Islam from the mid-1980s, the same did not occur in Sweden. Apart from New Democracy's short-lived success in the early 1990s, an RRPP did not gain parliamentary representation until the Sweden Democrats' (SD) breakthrough election in 2010, when the party polled 5.7% and gained 20 seats in the *Riksdag*. As noted by Strömbäck et al. (2017, p. 68), scholars have described Sweden's lack of a strong right-wing populist party as a European "exception", "deviation", "negative case", and "failure". While the SD became the country's third largest party in the 2018 elections,[48] the lack of a strong right-wing populist party until recently has likely contributed to a noticeably different public debate around Islam and immigration than in the other Scandinavian countries, especially compared to Denmark.

The long-time absence of a successful RRPP in Swedish politics is interesting given that the country has been strongly affected by international migration. Compared to Norway and Denmark, the level of immigration has been considerably higher, and asylum seekers (many of which have come from majority Muslim countries) have arrived in large numbers (Pettersen & Østby, 2013, pp. 77–79). Moreover, although the Swedish population in European comparisons have been found to be highly tolerant towards ethnic and religious minorities (Pew Research Center, 2018a) as well as highly supportive of migration (Heath, Richards, & Ford, 2016), there has been no shortage of opposition towards immigration among the Swedish population in *absolute* terms (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 346). Furthermore, the political impact of the Green Party shows that the institutional setup is conducive to niche parties that push new issues on the agenda (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 344).

[48] https://data.val.se/val/val2018/slutresultat/R/rike/index.html

Given these factors, it may seem puzzling that an RRPP was unable to achieve national representation until 2010. Scholars have given several reasons for this "failure". First, the socioeconomic left-right dimension has been particularly salient in Swedish politics, and sociocultural issues (e.g. immigration, national identity, and crime) have thus been less prominent than in Norway and Denmark. Second, the SD has its roots in explicitly racist organisations, meaning that it lacks the reputational shield wielded by the DF and FrP, which originally were anti-tax parties.[49] Third, the Swedish established parties' dismissive approach towards debating immigration has impeded the politicisation of the issue (Strömbäck et al., 2017, pp. 68–82). The SD was until 2019, when the party leaders of the mainstream right parties the Christian Democrats (*Kristendemokraterna*) and the Moderates (*Moderaterna*) opened for cooperation, largely isolated by the other parties.[50] This isolation has further impeded people from joining the party, since the social costs are high, and it may also have increased the threshold for voting for the party (Art, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2017).

Importantly, there has been a major disparity between the attitudes of the Swedish population and their elected politicians in relation to immigration. From 1990–2006, the proportion of Swedish citizens wanting a more restrictive refugee policy never dropped below 43%, with a high of 65% (Demker, 2009, p. 49). In contrast, the highest number among Swedish members of parliament who wanted a stricter policy never exceeded 17% (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 349). Compared to issues such as environmental protection and traditional left-right policy, the gap between members of parliament and voters was consistently three to four times

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[49] That is not to say that these parties were not also marked by anti-immigrant and racist views. For instance, the Danish Progress Party, a precursor to the DF, had as an objective to make Denmark "free of Muhammadans" in 1980 (Valbum, 2008), and the founder of the Norwegian Progress Party, Anders Lange, was a staunch advocate of the apartheid regime and called those who supported a majority rule in South Africa "traitors of the white race" (Rindedal, 2013, p. 33).

[50] Because this study analyses data from 2018, the SD was still isolated by all the other parties in the Riksdag during the studied period.

higher for immigration (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 349). Moreover, surveys from 1987–2006 show that immigration was regularly seen as one of the most central problems facing the country by between 7% and 25% of Swedes throughout the period. While it never was the top concern during these years, it was consistently seen as one of the top three issues facing the country (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 351).

Therefore, the lack of a strong Swedish right-wing populist party cannot be explained by low demand for more restrictive immigration policies (Strömbäck et al., 2017, p. 71). Rather, it is necessary to highlight the issue strategies of the established parties, more specifically how they have dismissed the immigration issue (Strömbäck et al., 2017, p. 71) and (until 2019) erected a *cordon sanitaire* towards the SD, i.e. largely avoided any collaboration (Rydgren, 2010, p. 58).

Swedish political parties' dismissal of the immigration issue is well illustrated by Dahlström and Esaiasson (2013), who find that during the period 1970–2006 a maximum of 4% of issue messages in political party programmes were about immigration. For reference, they report that the corresponding number for the environment issue was between 2% and 10%. The same study found that televised party leader debates during the same period also almost never discussed immigration. For most years, the proportion of issue messages related to immigration in these debates did not exceed 1%, with the 2002 election as an exception.[51] Voter studies where respondents were asked about what issues the parties emphasised the most during the election campaigns from 1970–2006

[51] In 2002, the centre-right Liberals (*Liberalerna*) proposed a policy that would require immigrants to pass a language test to obtain citizenship. In the election the same year, the Liberals was awarded significantly by the voters and gained 8.7 percentage points. The proposal was met by condemnation by the established parties (Lapidus, 2019) and led to immigration rising on the agenda, allowing the SD to focus on its core issue, leading to it more than tripling its electoral support in 2002, albeit from a very low level (Dahlström & Essaiasson, 2013, pp. 348, 356).

mirrored the low presence of the immigration issue in the party programmes and TV debates, again with the notable exception of 2002 (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 352). Illustratively, in the 1988 election when the Greens gained representation in the *Riksdag*, their main issue was high on the agenda of also the established parties. This was not the case with immigration, as the established parties dismissed it as an issue (Dahlström & Esaiasson, 2013, p. 351).

Describing different party-political dynamics in Sweden and Denmark that may be useful for understanding how differences in national discourse around immigration came about, Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008, p. 610) emphasise the role of the mainstream right-wing parties. As we saw in the subsection on Denmark, the Danish Social Democrats' alliance with the liberal centre party meant that mainstream right-wing parties were pushed to explore cooperation with the radical right populists to win government position. In Sweden, however, the Social Democrats were able to form majority governments by cooperating with parties to the left, which meant that the mainstream conservative party could form alliances with parties in the centre and had little incentive to seek cooperation with the radical right populists. This ability also meant that it would be a risk for the mainstream right party to politicise immigration, because this easily leads to conflict with the centre-right. Thus, right-wing populist voices were, unlike in Denmark, not in positions of power, which in turn may have contributed to the relatively weak position of anti-immigrant/anti-Islam positions in Swedish discourse.

With respect to the news media, it largely ignored the SD until 2006, when the party started receiving more attention (Strömbäck et al., 2017, p. 74). Scholars have argued that the increased media coverage may have benefited the party, at least to some extent. Hellström and Bevelander (2018) studied the parliamentary periods 2006–2010 and 2010–2014 and contend that the media was important for the increasing support for the SD in the first period but less so in the second. Although

the coverage was largely negative, the party gained support due to the increased visibility (Strömbäck et al., 2017, p. 75). As elsewhere, mass media's conduciveness to populism (Mazzoleni, 2008) may have benefited the SD; whether the coverage is negative may matter less than if media coverage is marked by personalisation, negativism, simplification, and more space for the drama of politics (Strömbäck et al., 2017, p. 75).

The negative media coverage, combined with the political *cordon sanitaire*, may have given incentives to citizens sympathetic to the SD to form counterpublics and engage in counterdiscourses, e.g. in social media and right-wing alternative news sites (Meret et al., 2016, p. 122). These alternative news sites, which especially focus on crime committed by Muslims and immigrants (Nygaard, 2019), are more popular in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark (Reuters News Report, 2019), and several of the outlets employ previous members of the SD.[52] Furthermore, the SD and its supporters have proven themselves highly active in social media like Facebook and Twitter. Because of their experience with the "opinion corridor" (*åsiktskorrodor*), a metaphor closely related to Hallins' spheres (1986) used to describe the consensus that has marked Swedish discourse and made it difficult to challenge established ideas, particularly around immigration-related issues, the SD has had strong incentives to use alternative channels.

As described in a study by Kalsnes (2019, p. 202), social media have been considered a vital part of the legitimation and normalisation process of the party. For instance, when the party gets opinion pieces published in established editorial news outlets, they link to them on social media not only to get more attention but to show that they gained access outside their own domain. The same study compared the social media strategy of the SD and the FrP, finding that the SD, in what it describes as a

[52] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-election-disinformation-exclus/exclusive-right-wing-sites-swamp-sweden-with-junk-news-in-tight-election-race-idUSKCN1LM0DN

hostile media landscape, has prioritised using social media to express their messages rather than to communicate with supporters in the comment sections, unlike the FrP, which have used social media both to communicate their own messages and to reply to supporters in the comments. Facebook especially has been an important platform for the SD, and it has focused on obtaining shares to an even higher degree than the FrP, because shares are considered to generate more visibility than likes (Kalnes, 2019, p. 202).

Like the radical right populist parties in Denmark and Norway (as well as RRPPs elsewhere), research shows that the SD have been highly successful in creating engagement on social media (Larsson, 2014, 2017). In the five months leading up to the 2018 elections, the SD had 2.55 million interactions on its Facebook posts, while number two, the Moderates, had 900,000 interactions. Furthermore, the far-right Alternative for Sweden (*Alternativ för Sverige*), founded by rejected members of the SD, which received only 0.3% of the votes in the general election, had 650,000 interactions on its posts—only beaten by the three largest parties—the Sweden Democrats, the Moderates, and the Social Democrats.[53] Overall, then, it seems clear that Swedish radical right actors thrive on online platforms.

Interestingly, while other parties started engaging more actively in the immigration debate in relation with the refugee crisis, the SD strengthened its issue ownership of immigration and integration from September 2014–April 2018, suggesting that the focus on immigration and integration contributed to boosting citizens' faith in the SD's policies on these issues (Hambraeus, 2018). The increased support for the SD was confirmed in the 2018 general election, when the party received 17.5% of the votes, a considerable increase from the 12.9% it polled in 2014.

The fact that other parties and the media have no longer been able to ignore the immigration issue is a crucial reason for the SD's success (Dahlström & Esaiasson,

[53] https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/enorma-pa-sociala-medier-osynliga-i-matningar/

2013; Strömbäck et al., 2017). It is also worth mentioning that the Sweden Democrats has moderated some of its policies, expelled some of its extreme members, and broadened its political appeal. Furthermore, the mainstream parties have converged on the socio-economic dimension—making such issues less decisive (Strömbäck et al., 2017, pp. 71–72). Subsequently, the salience of the sociocultural dimension has increased (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014), especially in the wake of the refugee crisis, which has clearly benefited the SD in the polls.

Integration/immigration was the most important issue for Swedes in 2015, 2016, 2017, and the second most important issue in 2018, when healthcare was number one (Martinsson & Andersson, 2019). Due to significant problems with crime—law and order has also been considered a crucial issue in recent years[54]—and the issue has repeatedly been addressed in media and political discourse in relation to problems with immigration and integration.[55] While some established parties now make a (more or less) direct link between crime and immigration, the results of the 2018 election may suggest that the voters are awarding the SD for its consistency in these issues.

Summing up this subsection, we have seen how the three countries' radical right populist parties have had varying success and thus varying degrees of influence on public discourse around immigration, integration, and Islam. While several factors may explain this, particular focus has here been on how established parties and mass media have adapted to the emergence of these parties. In Denmark, particularly the mainstream right-wing parties adopted some of DF's anti-immigrant, anti-multiculturalist rhetoric already towards the end of the 1990s. Because the

[54] https://novus.se/valjaropinionen/valjarforstaelse/viktigaste-politiska-fragan/
[55] See for instance
https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/opE2p7/kriminalitet-och-invandring-i-fokus-for-m
https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/busch-thor-varfor-utvisas-de-inte/
https://www.svd.se/m-invandringen-till-sverige-ar-fortsatt-ohallbar
https://www.svt.se/nyheter/statsministerns-svarta-vecka

centrist social liberal party served in government with the Social Democrats, the parties on the mainstream right were incentivised to seek collaboration with the right-wing populists (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008). Through its position as a support party to minority governments from 2001–2011 and 2015–2019, the DF had significant influence over policy pertaining to immigration and integration. The party's support role also gave it a central position from which it could express its opinions on these matters. This may have contributed to more negative attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims in the public sphere overall. Furthermore, unlike the SD, which for a long period was considered a deviant actor by the mass media and the political mainstream, the DF has been treated by the national press as "one of us", i.e. a part of the mainstream (Hellström & Hervik 2014, p. 463).

The Norwegian Progress Party, while not shunned by the other parties like the Sweden Democrats have been in Sweden, were kept at arm's length for several decades. It was not until 2009 that the Conservatives expressed a willingness to cooperate with the FrP in government (Jupskås, 2013). Having been in government since 2013, the party has moved towards the mainstream (or, from another perspective, the mainstream has moved towards the FrP), but it keeps making statements related to immigration and Islam that face substantial backlash from other parties and mass media (e.g. talking about "sneak Islamisation"), thereby also maintaining its image as an outsider party.

The Sweden Democrats was for a long period treated as a deviant actor by the mass media and other political parties. The *cordon sanitaire* erected towards the SD postponed debates around Islam, immigration, and integration, which took place earlier in the neighbour countries, due to the influence by the DF and the FrP. The SD has, however, had tremendous success in recent years, both in terms of electoral support and in the form of parties on the mainstream right opening the door for collaboration. The party's social media activity has been particularly important due

to what it considers to be a hostile mass media environment. Being active on alternative platforms has given the party a chance to challenge the (relatively restricted) sphere of legitimate controversy in the Swedish public sphere from outside the mainstream.

From having considered the varying influence of Scandinavian right-wing populist parties in this subsection, we will in the next subsection focus on older historical factors as potential explanations for differences between the countries. It is argued that these factors led to the formation of different views on nationalism and liberalism, which in turn may have led to divergent discourses on Islam, immigration, and integration.

Different Views on Nationalism and Liberalism Explained by Older Historical Factors

Although the countries share relatively similar histories of ethnic homogeneity, civil society development, Lutheran state churches, as well as relations that go back all the way to Viking times, the countries have also had different experiences that likely have influenced attitudes and debates about Islam, immigration, and integration (Storsveen, 2004, p. 378).

Gripsrud (2019) highlights that the Scandinavian countries were influenced to varying degrees by the romantic nationalist movement that marked Europe in the 19th century. This influence was strong in Norway and Denmark and less substantial in Sweden. Romantic nationalist ideas were particularly notable in Denmark after the country lost one third of its territory in a war with Germany over the southern part of Jutland in 1864. Consequently, a view of the country as small and vulnerable became an integral part of national identity. Danish nationalism was influenced by theologian Nikolaj Grundtvig “whose mix of religion, *folkelighed* (“folksiness”), and nationalism also influenced Norway and, less so, Sweden” (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 130).

Toward the turn of the 20th century, Sweden was marked by a struggle between proponents of a left-wing vision of the country as the most modern, advanced country in the world and a right-wing, upper class interest in constructing a backward-looking national identity. The left-wing vision of Sweden as a super-modern, liberal, advanced country became the official and leading idea of the country (Gripsrud, 2019, pp. 130–131). Illustrating how this ideology has manifested, Gripsrud (2019, p. 131) refers to a 2002 interview with a leading Swedish social democrat, Mona Sahlin, in which she states the following: "I think that is why many Swedes are so envious of immigrant groups. You have a culture, an identity, a history, something that binds you together. And what do we have? We have Midsummer's Eve and some 'silly' songs."[56]

Also highlighting historical factors as explanatory factors for why Islam and integration have been handled differently in the Scandinavian countries, Jakobsen (2016) points to different views on liberalism: while Sweden has been marked by classical liberalism, characterised by freedom from state intervention (i.e. negative freedom), Denmark has been marked by a focus on "freedom to" (i.e. positive freedom) an idea referred to in the field of history of ideas as republicanism,[57] with roots in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rosseau and the French revolution.[58] While the classical liberalist tradition is consistent with a multiculturalist policy, the republican view holds that freedom entails active democratic participation, and that it is through one's participation in democratic processes that freedom is achieved. From the latter perspective, using e.g. face veils like the burqa or niqab would be considered a way of limiting one's ability to participate in democratic processes,

[56] https://ligator.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/intervju_3.pdf
[57] Not to be confused with the type of republicanism that is in opposition to monarchical rule.
[58] Interview with Kjetil Jakobsen on Forskning.no 7 November 2016: https://forskning.no/filosofiske-fag-religionshistorie/vi-krangler-fortsatt-om-det-samme-som-pa-1600-tallet/386076

whereas from the classical liberalist perspective, the state should not meddle in how people choose to practice their religion (Jakobsen, 2016).

Sweden and England are examples of countries characterised by classical liberalism and multiculturalism, whereas France and Denmark are countries that have been strongly influenced by republicanism—and that have argued that integration necessitates more active measures. Norway is found in a position between the two traditions of liberalism, although the country has a strong democratic unity culture, like Denmark. Denmark and Norway were characterised by absolutism (*enevelde*) for many centuries. In contrast, Sweden was never an absolutist state and has stronger classical liberalist traditions, out of which the multiculturalist ideology could develop (Jakobsen, 2016, p. 157). Jakobsen explains that "Sweden and England are countries with strong liberal traditions and elites who for historical reasons are very confident. They have not lost big wars, been occupied, or experienced revolution. The governing elites in these countries have a historical confidence, which says that 'coercion is unnecessary, the others want to become like us anyway'" [my translation from Norwegian].[59]

In addition to different influences found in the history of ideas, the countries have different histories of emigration and immigration, which also may have affected how they have debated Islam and related topics. Emigration overseas in the 19th and early 20th century, especially to North America, was major from all the three countries, but more significant from Norway and Sweden than from Denmark.[60] The countries also had different experiences with immigration after the Second World

[59] From an interview with Jakobsen in the print version of *Vårt Land* 22 September 2018, pp. 12–17.

[60] Sweden, which had around 5 million inhabitants in 1900, had 1.5 million emigrants. Denmark had about 2.5 million inhabitants, and 400.000 emigrated (Borevi et al., 2017, p. 7). Norway, which had a population of around 2.2 million, was the Scandinavian country with the highest number of overseas emigrants relative to its population (Østby, 2005, p. 26), with as many as around 800.000 Norwegians emigrating overseas. https://www.norgeshistorie.no/industrialisering-og-demokrati/artikler/1537-utvandring-fra-norge.html

War, which started earlier and was larger in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway. Sweden was, unlike Norway and Denmark, not occupied during the war and could continue its industrial development relatively unhindered (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012). Sweden therefore experienced the need for labour migrants after the war sooner. While particularly Finns and Estonians migrated to Sweden, Sweden had immigrants from Southern Europe already in the 1950s (Gripsrud, 2019, p. 131).

It may also have played a role that while Denmark had colonies (Greenland and the Faroe Islands) and a small German-speaking minority in Schleswig, only Norway and Sweden had "internal" aboriginal minorities (the Sami people and Finnish populations). Furthermore, Sweden's neutrality during the Second World War may have prompted a more persistent self-examination of its past and impetus towards anti-racism compared to the other two countries (Borevi et al., 2017, p. 7).

The differences outlined likely contributed to the different discourses (and policies) on Islam, immigration, and integration that have developed in the three countries. While Denmark has predominantly underlined the assimilation of immigrants, i.e. the view that newcomers should one-sidedly adapt to Danish culture, following ideas of the priority of a Danish "leitkultur",[61] Sweden was in the forefront in Europe when it came to state-sponsored multiculturalism in the late 1970s and 1980s (Larsson & Lindekilde, p. 2009, p. 363). In fact, Sweden was the only of the three Scandinavian countries to officially (for a limited period) introduce a multiculturalism that explicitly assumed responsibility of protecting immigrants as ethnic minority group (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012). Although not going as far in actively pursuing a multiculturalist society, Norwegian authorities took inspiration

[61] The term translates to "leading" or "guiding culture". For more, see for instance https://www.dw.com/en/german-issues-in-a-nutshell-leitkultur-acceptance-vs-assimilation/a-38850129

from Sweden's approach in the 1970s, before later moving closer to Denmark's assimilationist line (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012).

Different Experiences With Violent Right-Wing Extremism

In addition to varying influence from right-wing populist parties and different views on nationalism and liberalism emanating from older historical factors, another contextual factor that may explain different discourses on Islam is different experiences with violent right-wing extremism. While a democratic right-wing populist party struggled for a long time to break through in Sweden, Sweden was the Western European country with the highest number of right-wing extremist motivated murder incidents relative to its population from 1990–2015 (Enstad & Ravndal, 2015). Enstad and Ravndal (2015) argue that this is the result of a combination of three factors: (1) record high levels of immigration, (2) a debate climate where legitimate criticism of immigration has been morally condemned, and (3) having the largest right-wing extremist movement in the Nordic region.

In the 1990s, militant right-wing movements grew strong in Scandinavia. During the 2000s, however, these movements collapsed in Norway and Denmark and were replaced by less violent and more populist movements and parties. Conversely, the Swedish Nazi-movement has operated continuously ever since the inter-war period (Enstad & Ravndal, 2015). A stronger presence of neo-Nazis in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries may have contributed to making established politicians and media less willing to accept criticism of immigration and Islam, fearing that this could lead to the demonisation of minorities that could be exploited by militant far-right actors. Moreover, the relatively large presence of neo-Nazi actors may have contributed to strengthening anti-racist attitudes—and thus also boosted the prominence of anti-racist discourse in the Swedish public sphere.

Varying Involvement in the "War on Terror"

The Scandinavian countries' varying degrees of involvement in the United States-led "War on Terror" may also have contributed to different debates around Islam.[62] Denmark has followed the U.S. very closely despite there being general European as well as intra-Nordic reservation about involvement in some parts of the War on Terror, such as the invasion of Iraq (Gebhard, 2017). Denmark has therefore had a more active participation with more casualties in wars in Muslim majority countries than Norway and Sweden have. This may have contributed to more widespread negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, and thus a higher presence of such attitudes in the Danish public sphere. With 43 casualties, Denmark is the coalition country in Afghanistan with the highest number of deaths relative to its population.[63] Norway has suffered 10 casualties from the war in Afghanistan (Gabrielsen, 2012), and Sweden has suffered 5 casualties (Wendt & Åse, 2017).

Still, while the varying involvement in these operations may have reinforced differences, it did not cause them. As we have seen, Danish discourse on Islam, influenced by the Danish People's Party, started to diverge substantially from Norwegian and Swedish discourse already in the latter half of the 1990s, in other words before the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing "war on terror".

From having described the differences between Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish discourse on Islam and suggested potential explanations for these, this chapter concludes with formulating hypotheses to be tested in relation to the analysed Facebook posts and comments. These hypotheses are based on the empirical context outlined in this chapter, Facebook affordances (see Chapter 1), and the theoretical perspectives applied in this study (see Chapters 1 and 3).

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[62] Professor at the University of Copenhagen, Stig Hjarvard, makes this point in an article by *The Atlantic* in relation to the Danish ban of face-covering clothing: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/denmark-burqa-veil-ban/566630/.

[63] https://politiken.dk/udland/art4788077/Danmark-mister-flest-soldater-i-Afghanistan

Hypotheses

Research question 1 of this dissertation was as follows: To what extent do Norwegian, Swedish and Danish news outlets' Facebook posts and their associated articles about Islam differ (with respect to genre, theme, sources, and sentiment), and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

The counterpublic perspective, which we were briefly introduced to in Chapter 1 and which will be elaborated in the following chapter, considers digital communication to be facilitating both dominant and counter-publics. Dominant discourses are reproduced through for instance mainstream media and established politicians' digital communication (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861). It is thus expected that the findings from analysing the mainstream news outlets' posts and linked articles largely will reflect findings from existing research of Scandinavian mass media- and political discourse on Islam and immigration. As we have seen, Scandinavian comparisons have typically found that discourse on Islam and immigration has been highly negative in Denmark, relatively amicable in Sweden, with Norway in a position between the two (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Hovden et al., 2019; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). However, given the change in Swedish debate climate since the refugee crisis, and studies that have shown Swedish media tend to cover Islam negatively (Axner, 2015; Hvitfelt, 1998; Lundby et al., 2018), the difference between Swedish and Norwegian news outlets is expected to be relatively small. It is therefore assumed that:

H1: Danish posts (and their associated article texts) will cover Islam more negatively than Norwegian and Swedish posts (and their associated article texts) will. The Norwegian posts will be more negative than the Swedish posts, albeit the difference will be marginal.

Research question 2 was as follows: To what extent do comments on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages differ with respect to the

sentiment they express towards Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

In line with the corrective action perspective, which predicts that citizens will attempt to “correct” perceived “wrongs” in the public sphere by taking action, it is assumed that the comments will show an almost diametrically opposed result from the news outlets’ posts and the public sphere at large. This effect is however expected to be dampened (in the case of Denmark) and strengthened (in the cases of Sweden and Norway) by the fact that those participating in online discussions on immigration tend to be more negative to immigration than the general population (Enjolras et al., 2013), and that studies of social media discourse on Islam and Muslims have found mainly negative depictions (Awan, 2016, McEnery et al., 2015; Oboler, 2016, Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). By this I mean that in the Norwegian, and, in particular, the Swedish case, where there is reason to believe that Islam-critical commenters may have an extra strong incentive to correct what they perceive to be an overly Islam-friendly public sphere, this effect will be strengthened by the fact that social media discourse on Islam generally tends to be negative. Conversely, in the Danish case, it would from a corrective action perspective be expected that Islam-friendly individuals would be more likely to express their opinions than Islam-sceptic individuals, due to the prevalence of anti-Islam views in the Danish public sphere. This effect will, however, likely be dampened or eliminated because of the general dominance of negative voices in social media discourse on Islam. Therefore, it is assumed that:

H2: All countries’ comment sections will have more negative than positive comments about Islam. In line with the corrective action perspective, the Swedish comment sections will have the highest number of negative comments compared to positive comments, the Danish comment sections will have the lowest number of

negative compared to positive comments, and the Norwegian comment sections will be in a middle position.

The third research question was: To what extent are comment sections on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages permeated by counterpublic discourses around Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained?

As was touched on in Chapter 1, this project views comment sections on the Facebook pages of established news outlets as arenas where counterpublic-minded individuals may have particularly strong incentives to express their opinions. It is, however, not expected that this will manifest to the same extent in the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian comment sections. In a relevant study, Heft et al. (2019) examined the inhibitors and drivers of alternative right-wing media in six countries. They pointed to the inclusiveness of established media towards radical right-wing actors as well as the electoral success of RRPPs as key factors influencing the demand for right-wing alternative news sites. In Sweden and Germany, where these outlets are popular, established media have been unaccommodating towards radical right attitudes, and radical right populist parties have (until recently) had low success and been largely shunned by the other parties. In Denmark and Austria, where alternative right-wing news outlets are relatively unpopular,[64] established media have been largely inclusive of radical right populist actors and views, and these parties have had great electoral success and influence (Heft et al., 2019).

While Norway was not included in Heft et al's (2019) study, the most popular alternative right-wing outlet in the country is read on a weekly basis by 7% of Norwegians, compared to 11% of Swedes and 4% of Danes (Reuters Institute, 2019).

[64] Demand for alternative right-wing outlets in Austria was higher than expected by the authors, which could be explained by the large share of German users on these sites (Heft et al., 2019, p. 19).

Given Norway's middle position also when it comes to openness to radical right-wing voices in the established media and influence of right-wing populist parties on public discourse, this is consistent with Heft et al's (2019) analysis. It is expected that the same logic that seems to apply to the demand for right-wing alternative news sites will be applicable to the prevalence of counterdiscursive comments found in this study. Thus, it is assumed that:

H3: Islam-critical counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, the least prevalent in the Danish comment sections, while the Norwegian comment sections will be found between these. Correspondingly, Islam-*positive* counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Danish comment sections and the least prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, with Norway again expected to be in a middle position.

The fourth and final research question asks: To what extent do popularity cues correlate with different Facebook posts and comments about Islam, and how can correlations, or the lack of such, be explained?

Given how radical right-wing actors have had significant success in creating engagement in social media (Larsson, 2014, 2017; Lorentzen, 2014), it is predicted that:

H4a: Negative posts about Islam will receive many more popularity cues than positive posts will. The hypothesis is considered to have strong support if negative posts have 1.5+ times as many shares and likes as positive posts do.

Hypothesis 4b also deals with popularity cues assigned to posts, and is based on the view that those who have a particularly high incentive to "correct" what they perceive to be wrong about how Islam is handled in the public sphere will to a high degree like and share content that they endorse or consider relevant. Therefore, it is assumed that:

H4b: In line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative posts will receive the highest number of likes and shares relative to the number of likes and shares received by Islam-positive posts, while Danish Islam-negative items will receive the lowest number of likes and shares relative to the likes and shares received by Islam-positive items. Norway will be found between the two in terms of the ratio of popularity cues on negative and positive items.

Following the same logic for the comments, it is hypothesised that:

H4c: In line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative comments will receive the highest number of likes relative to the number of likes received by Islam-positive comments, while Danish Islam-negative comments will receive the lowest number of likes relative to the likes received by Islam-positive comments. Norway will be found between the two in terms of the ratio of likes on negative and positive comments.

Finally, it is predicted that:

H4d: In line with viewing comment sections as providing substantial affordances for counterpublic-minded individuals to challenge mainstream-minded individuals, counterdiscursive comments will receive a higher number of likes than mainstream comments will. Particularly comments engaging in anti-Islam counterpublic discourse will receive many likes.

Chapter Summary

While the Scandinavian countries share central traits like long histories of cultural homogeneity and Lutheran state churches, as well as similar civil society development, welfare systems, and media systems, they have had noticeably different discussions around Islam, immigration, and integration. Roughly put, Danish discourse on Islam and immigration has been harsh and polarising, Swedish discourse has been relatively amicable towards Islam and immigration, while Norwegian discourse has been in a middle position. In recent years, there are

however signs of convergence, as the spheres of consensus, legitimacy, and deviance (Hallin, 1986) have been considerably redefined in Sweden in the wake of the refugee crisis (Truedson, 2016), and more Islam- and immigrant-critical voices have gained access to prominent arenas of the public sphere (Brochmann, 2018).

To explain the differences between the countries' discourse on Islam, one factor that has been highlighted in particular is the varying level of influence of radical right populist parties, which has been substantial in Norway, and, especially, Denmark, while it has been almost non-existent until recently in Sweden. The extensive influence of the Danish People's Party on Danish debate contributed to making immigrant-critical and anti-multiculturalist views commonplace among other political parties and the established news media from the mid-1990s. In contrast, the Sweden Democrats, which did not have its electoral breakthrough until 2010, has been isolated by the more established parties and was largely ignored by the media until 2006, postponing debates around Islam, immigration, and integration. In Norway, the Progress Party has been essential for the politicisation of immigration and Islam. While it has been criticised by the other parties and political commentators for its Islam/immigrant-negative remarks, the party has been relatively popular among Norwegian citizens and managed, at least to some degree, to uphold its image as an "outsider" party in relation to debates on immigration and Islam, despite being in government from 2013–2020.

The differences in political, media, and public discourse is, as indicated by the formulated hypotheses, expected to affect the findings from the studied Facebook posts and comments in certain ways.

In the following chapter, the theoretical and conceptual approach of the dissertation, which has yet to be fully explained and discussed, are presented.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Approach

This chapter initially outlines the theoretical foundation of the dissertation, rooted in counterpublic theory. Subsequently, it presents the theoretical framework applied, which is built on the theoretical foundations laid out in the initial subsection of the chapter. Finally, it returns to two concepts briefly addressed in the previous chapters, Hallin's spheres (1986) and corrective action (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Rojas, 2010), which are applied in this dissertation to provide further theoretical insights in the discussion of the data.

Counterpublic Theory

Writings on counterpublics (Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993; Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990) rose in response to Jürgen Habermas's pivotal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962/1989). These writings criticised Habermas's understanding of a singular, overarching public sphere where individuals bracket status differentials and deliberate rationally "as if" they were social equals. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972/1993) were the first to use the term counterpublic (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*) in their book *Public Sphere and Experience* (*Öffentlichket und Erfahrung*). They described what they called a "proletarian public sphere", a distinct and oppositional public to the "bourgeois public sphere" that Habermas considered as a normative model. While Habermas saw proletarian public spheres as merely a passive echo of the bourgeois public sphere and thus not worthy of much attention (Habermas, 1992, p. 427), Negt and Kluge believed in the productive possibilities of counterpublics. As explained by Downey and Fenton (2003, p. 17), Negt and Kluge saw the formation of counterpublics as offering forms of solidarity and reciprocity grounded in a collective experience of marginalisation and expropriation.

As the term "proletarian public sphere" indicates, Negt and Kluge primarily focused on the working class (Farmer, 2013). Still, their book may have "provided a rallying

point for the whole spectrum of groups and movements … because it allowed these groups to think of their work as at once oppositional and public" (Hansen, 1993, p. xvi). This marked, on the one hand, a considerable shift in the way of thinking of the public sphere, because to be radically oppositional in the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere is to be at odds with the very idea of publicness itself, i.e., it is to be *illegitimate* (Farmer, 2013). Negt and Kluge, on the other hand, open for groups and movements to consider themselves as simultaneously oppositional and public (Farmer, 2013). Whereas Habermas highlights formal conditions of communication (free association, equal participation, deliberation, polite argument), Negt and Kluge emphasise questions of constituency, concrete needs, interests, conflicts, protest, and power. In so doing, they shine a light on the structures that control what can be said and what cannot be said and which and whose experience is considered (ir)relevant (Hansen, 1993, p. xxxi).

Because Negt and Kluge's book about the proletarian public sphere was not translated into English until 1993, Rita Felski (1989) in her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* was the first to use the term in an English text (Brouwer, 2006, p. 195). Focusing on the feminist public, Felski (1989, p. 167) argues that "The experience of discrimination, oppression, and cultural dislocation provides the impetus for the development of a self-consciously oppositional identity", namely a feminist counterpublic sphere. Similarly, Nancy Fraser in a pivotal essay, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1990), argues that groups like women, ethnic minorities, labourers, and LGBTQ people have been excluded and marginalised from the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, and that they have been forced to form their own publics to be free from (formal and informal) constraints. In an oft-cited definition, Fraser calls such publics who contest dominant publics "subaltern counterpublics" and describes them as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate

counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). As such, counterpublic theory reveals oblique relations of power that inform public discourse and, at the same time, discloses that participants in the public sphere partake in potentially emancipatory practices with the aim of reconfiguring power (Asen, 2000, p. 425).

Felski's and Fraser's work on counterpublics appeared around the time of the English translation of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989. At the conference to mark the English translation, Craig Calhoun opposed Habermas's view that the consequences of mass media were uniformly negative. Habermas (1962/1989) had argued that mass media, which were controlled by large corporations, were more concentrated on entertainment and profit than facilitating rational debate. Responding to this, Calhoun argued that there is certain room for manoeuvre for "alternative democratic media strategies" (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 186). He referred, on the one hand, to the possibility of groups in civil society influencing the mass media, and on the other, of establishing alternative, discursively connected public spheres (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 186). While maintaining that most of his earlier description of the public sphere in the 20th century is correct, Habermas (1996) has revised his original thesis to take account of such phenomena. This relates particularly to instances of intentional political mobilization that aim to intervene in the mass media public sphere or to develop a counterpublic (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 187). As explained by Downey and Fenton (2003, p. 187), Habermas currently recognises not only the existence of alternative public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination.

Crucially, many theorists in this vein have criticised the idea of a unitary public sphere and tend to underline the power differences and competitive relationship between multiple, unequal publics spheres (Breese, 2011, p. 131). In contrast with

Habermas's original understanding of the public sphere, it is now widely accepted that there are, and were at the time of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in the 18th century, multiple publics (Eley, 1992; Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1996; Ikegami, 2000). The movement toward multiplicity in the scholarly literature on the public sphere, i.e. that there are multiple, unequal publics, was driven by a recognition of sociocultural diversity; a single, overarching public sphere ignores or denies such diversity.

It is as a public within a public sphere conceived as a multiplicity that counterpublics emerge (Asen, 2000, p. 425). As Asen (2000) explains, Foucault, among others, has argued that norms are always active in discursive encounters, which implicates relations of power. These (oft-implicit) norms regulating discourse are likely to benefit some participants and to disadvantage others (p. 425). Participatory norms can be "powerful silencers or evaluators of speech in many actual speaking situations where culturally differentiated and socially unequal groups live together" (Young, 1996, p. 124). If materialised in a singular public sphere, these norms link up with similarly reified, already established notions of the common good and function as "complementary exclusionary mechanisms that restrict discursive engagement and undermine the interests of oppressed groups" (Asen 2000, p. 425). Therefore, scholars on counterpublic theory have emphasised that the (formal and informal) exclusions of e.g. women, workers, LGBTQ people, and ethnic minorities disprove the idealistic claims of accessibility and open debate that legitimated the historical bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (e.g. Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990).

A similar conception of democracy to the one described in Fraser's (1990) essay was launched by Mouffe (2000) in the form of what she called an "agonistic" model of democracy. Whereas the deliberative model of democracy that was developed by Habermas is oriented towards achieving consensus through rational debate where

interlocutors bracket passions, the agonistic model has as a basic premise that "Politics consists in domesticating hostility" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15). According to Mouffe (2000, p. 15), "Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an 'us' by the termination of a 'them'". Envisaged from this point of view, the aim of democratic politics is "to construct the 'them' in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an 'adversary', i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15). Rather than eliminating passions from public spheres, the agonistic model holds that the main task of democratic politics is to mobilise those passions towards democratic designs (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16). This view relates to a key thesis of the agonistic model, namely that agonistic confrontation is the very condition of democracy's existence. Thus, the agonistic model considers legitimating conflict and acknowledging the pluralism of values that exists in democracy crucial for democratic societies (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16). An agonistic understanding used in research of political debates online will focus less upon the performance of rational deliberation and more upon the way sites for online communication can operate as arenas of discursive struggle and conflict (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 60).

Counterpublics can have an important function within an agonistic model of democracy. For instance, the democratic aim of feminist counterpublics would be to transform the hegemonic structure of the overarching public sphere into a new hegemonic structure integrating feminist interests and needs (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 469). Counterpublics have been able to make issues long ignored by dominant publics become important matters of public debate. Fraser (1990, p. 67) gives the example of feminist women who in the late 20th century invented new terms for describing social reality, including sexism, the double shift, sexual harassment, and marital, date, and acquaintance rape: "Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating,

the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres". From this it follows that counterpublics are in no way intended to be separatist or isolated enclaves of discourse.[65] Rather, their principal purpose is to engage in publicity and break up hegemonic consensual patterns within dominant public spheres, and to expand discursive space and offset the "unjust privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups" (Fraser, 1990, p. 68).

Still, it is in a dialectic between two functions that the emancipatory potential of counterpublics resides (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). This dual character (Asen 2000; Felski 1989; Fraser 1990; Warner, 2002) takes the form of functioning as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment, on the one hand, and functioning as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics, on the other (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). Whereas the former function, which consists of inward-oriented goals, can be expected to be pursued in safe, secluded communicative spaces, the latter function, which consists of outward-oriented goals, are expressed in communicative spaces that are attended by mainstream audiences but that allow counterpublic-minded individuals to express their opinions (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018, p. 2014). Inward-oriented goals' primary function is to invent, elaborate, and formulate alternative identities, interests, and needs (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018, p. 2014). Outward-oriented goals are ultimately to break up and shift consensus structures within dominant publics by engaging wider publics and targeting dominant publics with "counterpublicity"—an activity akin to "going public" (Asen, 2000, p. 441).

It is primarily the outward, agitational activity that is studied in this project. The established news outlet's Facebook pages feature large audiences, where counterpublic-minded individuals have a significant opportunity to challenge wider

[65] Squires (2002) proposes that one separates between enclaves, counterpublics, and satellite public spheres based, in part, on the degree to which discourse is concealed from the wider public and on whether the public seeks to engage with the wider public.

publics. At the same time, publishing impolite and emotional comments may also be seen as a (although not necessarily intentional) way of building identity among counterpublic-minded individuals, i.e. inward-oriented goals. Furthermore, the mere presence of counterdiscourses in an arena with a wide audience may contribute to a sense of identity-building among counterpublic-minded individuals, because the presence of counterdiscursive ideas may create a sense of being a part of a larger group or movement. In this sense, outward-oriented communication can potentially achieve the goals of inward-oriented communication (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019, p. 249). Generally, though, inward-oriented goals are likely most effectively pursued in more secluded communicative spaces.

Counterpublic collectives can operate in numerous communicative spaces, and this has been truer than ever after the advent of the internet and social media. Research has shown that counterdiscourses emerge on online arenas like alternative news sites, blogs, social media, and comment sections (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Geiger, 2016; Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016; Leung & Lee, 2014; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018). As was argued in Chapter 1, counterpublic-minded individuals may have particularly high incentives to comment and to like items they support in arenas close to a superordinate public sphere, such as comment sections below mainstream news posts. First, this relates to the fact that these comment sections are visible to a large audience, meaning they provide a unique opportunity to challenge (what is perceived as) mainstream actors and ideas. Second, despite moderation rules restricting the most deviant forms of speech, there is still a relatively low threshold for what content can be published in the comment sections compared to letters to the editor, an earlier and related format. Third, comment sections make it possible to engage in counterpublic discourses in spatial vicinity to specific hegemonic ideas as these are formulated in the mainstream public sphere (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, pp. 471–472). Moreover, since relatively few people in Northern European countries seem to publish user comments (Reuters Institute,

2019), counterpublic-minded individuals have a chance to considerably impact the content in this arena, and thus also influence how people perceive a case or topic (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; von Sikorski, 2016; von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016).

As this subsection about counterpublic theory's background has implied with mentions of feminists, workers, LGBTQ people, and ethnic minorities, counterpublics have typically been associated with left-leaning and progressive collectives (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018, p. 2025). Scholars have often analysed how people have sought to overcome exclusions based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other factors (Asen, 2016, p. 5). Still, it is important to note that counterpublics can also be right-wing, populist, and nationalist (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Some publics can even be anti-democratic (Cammaerts, 2009). Fraser herself specifies that she does "not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are necessarily virtuous" (1990, p. 67). Generally, though, she sees the proliferation of "subaltern counterpublics" in stratified societies as a good thing—insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, and, thus, help expand discursive space (p. 67).

Importantly, studying counterpublic discourses expressed by nationalist, right-wing, or anti-Islam collectives implicates a challenge to Fraser's (1990) definition of counterpublics with respect to her characterising them as *subaltern*. Warner (2002, p. 56) makes this point when he describes counterpublics as those publics that are "defined by their tension with a larger public", without using an additional criterion of being subaltern. If we consider that counterpublics can be nationalist, right-wing, or anti-Islamic, it seems probable that participants in such publics are not necessarily subaltern in terms of material resources or social identity (e.g. gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality). In fact, they may be among the more well-off people in society. This can also be illustrated by the fact that, while women and workers historically have been marginalised groups, members of feminist and worker

counterpublic collectives can be people of high social status, for instance academics. As such, participation in counterpublics is not dependent on a subaltern social status and identity and can just as well be based on issue-specific political solidarity (Breese, 2011, p. 141).

In fact, in some cases, the only reason participants are considered subaltern is their engagement in the counterdiscourse. In other words, as argued by Warner (2002, p. 87), subordinate status of participants in a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public contributes to forming and transforming members' identity. To take a relevant example, anti-Islam counterpublic-minded individuals are not necessarily marginalised because of their social status and identity, but they may be marginalised because of how their participation in the counterdiscourse leads to a tension with a larger public (see e.g. Løvlie et al., 2018a).

A related, crucial point is that counterpublics *can* emerge without the participants actually being excluded from or marginalised within wider publics. What is decisive is rather whether they have a *perception* of themselves as excluded or marginalised (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 860). As Brouwer (2006, p. 197) explains, "Counterpublics emerge when social actors *perceive* themselves to be excluded from or marginalized within mainstream or dominant publics and communicate about that marginality or exclusion" [emphasis added]. Similarly, Asen's (2000) focus is not on exclusion per se, but on the *recognition* of exclusion, because this avoids "essentialist understandings of difference and situates counter as a constructed relationship" (p. 427). For instance, while some criticise a politically correct elite that decides what is accepted discourse and is ready to demonise you if you dare to oppose these boundaries of discourse in the immigration debate, others may see this criticism as completely misguided and as an attempt to legitimise racism, discrimination, or xenophobia (Hagelund, 2004b). Overall, since actors can have (completely) different

perceptions of how issues are treated in the public sphere, it is best to view the "counter" as a self-perceived position.

This is well illustrated by Neumayer's (2013) study of two parallel counterpublics in Germany: neo-Nazis and anti-fascists. She describes both publics as subordinate, in the sense that they feel marginalised from the larger public sphere (Neumayer, 2013, p. 33). Scandinavian discourse on Islam are also marked by groups on "both sides" who feel that their perspectives are marginalised or excluded from the mainstream. For instance, Scandinavian alternative, anti-Islamic news outlets aim to convince the public that the Scandinavian societies have become unsafe due to increased (Muslim) immigration, and that the political elite, the mainstream media, and the criminal justice system are to blame for the perceived societal crises the Scandinavian countries are finding themselves in (Nygaard, 2019, p. 1147). At the same time, progressive and left-wing actors have positioned themselves as correctives to what they have seen as a public debate rampant with racism, emanating from the top (Gullestad, 2002; Mulinari & Neergard, 2017).

The existence of right-wing counterpublics have some potentially significant implications for the literature on counterpublics, traditionally marked by a normative focus on progressive and left-wing collectives' struggle to achieve political change. While Fraser (1990) mentions that counterpublics can be anti-democratic, and Downey and Fenton (2003) highlight the need to understand and research right-wing actors from a counterpublic perspective, there have been relatively few such studies, albeit there seems to have been an upswing in recent years (see e.g. Cammaerts, 2009; Holm, 2019; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Neumayer, 2013; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Törnberg & Wahlström, 2018). A likely explanation is that the normative evaluations generally associated with

(progressive) counterpublics has limited the scope of research, leading to right-wing groups falling outside the theoretical map.[66]

At the same time, the relational perspective, i.e. that counterpublics are best understood as self-perceived correctives to a dominant, excluding public sphere (Asen, 2002; Brouwer, 2006; Warner, 2002), rather than that they are excluded per se, provides a highly useful vantage point for studying counterpublics emanating from different ideologies. This aspect of the theoretical literature on counterpublics is thus emphasised in this dissertation, because it is expected that the comments on Islam will feature counterdiscourses from at least two opposing perspectives, deriving both from those highly sceptic and those highly sympathetic towards Islam and/or Muslims.

This chapter has until now outlined the theoretical foundations of counterpublics. In the following, it will be specified how the theory is used in this dissertation to develop a theoretical framework for analysing the prevalence of counterpublic discourses in the analysed comment sections.

Theoretical framework

To identify an appropriate theoretical framework, the dissertation draws largely on Toepfl and Piwoni's (2015) framework for studying counterpublics. Like the majority of recent theoretical accounts of the public sphere (e.g. Asen, 2000; Breese, 2011; Fraser, 1990; Dahlberg, 2007, 2011), they view the overarching public sphere of a polity—"the public sphere at large" (Fraser, 1992, p. 124)—as being comprised of a multiplicity of unequal (sub)public spheres. They suggest that researchers can delimit each of these subpublic spheres for heuristic purposes, by evaluating the characteristics of three criteria: (1) the *communicative spaces* within which a public sphere operates (e.g. the mass media, social networks, salons, parliament, online

[66] This point is also made by Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019) in relation to the study of alternative news media.

forums); (2) the shared *discursive patterns* that distinguish a public sphere (e.g. deliberative discursive norms in the Habermasian tradition or the perception of exclusion in counterpublic theory; and (3) *the participants* who constitute a public sphere, both those actively contributing and the audience (e.g. journalists, activists, politicians, ordinary citizens) (Toepfl & Piwoni 2015, pp. 469–470). In addition, a fourth criterion (*attitude*) was added in this study to account for the fact that *participants* in the same *communicative space* may engage in similar *discursive patterns* and still have diametrically opposed views. This was necessary as commenters were found to challenge the wider public sphere by being both highly negative and highly positive to Islam.

The heuristically delimited subpublic spheres in this study operate within the comment sections on Facebook (*communicative space*), express a perception of exclusion or marginalisation and often use informal and emotional language, although some comments are removed due to moderation rules against hate speech and other uncivil talk (*discursive patterns*), are made up by politically interested citizens who express their opinions about news on Islam on Facebook, while journalists function as moderators and, sometimes, as intervenors (*the participants*), and express fringe opinions on Islam and/or Muslims, one being highly negative, the other being highly positive (*attitude*). These two subpublic spheres, which are identified as analytically separate based on the criterion of attitude, are further separated from a third subpublic sphere. This subpublic sphere is found in the same communicative space, i.e. the Facebook comment sections, and is also marked by (at least superficially) similar participants, i.e. politically interested readers who express their views on Islam. This third subpublic is, however, different with respect to discursive patterns and attitude, as it does not presume to be marginalised or excluded. Rather, it engages in mainstream discourse (see the end of this subsection for a distinction between mainstream and counterpublic discourse) and is marked by more moderate attitudes to Islam. As such, the theoretical framework led to the

identification of three distinct subpublic spheres operating in the studied comment sections: (1) an anti-Islamist/Islam-critical/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim counterpublic sphere, (2) a pro-Islam/pro-Muslim counterpublic sphere, and (3) a mainstream public sphere. There was also semblance of a (4) counterpublic sphere marked by Islamist and conservative Islamic attitudes, although this group was highly marginal.

The above-mentioned subpublics operating within the comment sections were identified as separate from a substantially more powerful subpublic sphere. This subpublic sphere is found in the established news outlets' Facebook posts, which typically link to a longer news item on the established news media's website (*communicative space*). The language used is typically more formal, and established norms for press coverage and journalism are central (*discursive patterns*). Media professionals in the form of editors and journalists function as gatekeepers and primarily present the voices of elite sources such as politicians and civil servants. The audience is (as with the readers of comment sections) politically interested citizens (*participants*). The opinions on Islam found in this subpublic sphere are typically more moderate compared to several of the other analytically identified subpublics (*attitude*).

As pointed out by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015), the mass media is arguably one of the most powerful subpublic spheres within the public sphere at large, as it has a huge audience, is widely consumed by the countries' elites, "and can thus be considered as having considerable impact on the formation of political will" (p. 470). In comparison, the subpublics in the comment sections are read by fewer people and can be considered much less powerful, as they feature less respected speakers and a significantly smaller, less influential audience. At the same time, they can be considered markedly more influential than secluded subpublics found, for instance, in issue-specific forums or on blogs, which are spaces that typically have a yet smaller and considerably less diverse audience (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 470). As

pointed out by Springer et al. (2015), since user comments are presented beneath news items, they are distributed via mass media, thus having the potential to reach a large audience.

As we saw in the previous subsection, this study views counterpublics as self-perceived correctives, rather than as excluded per se (Asen, 2000; Brouwer, 2006; Warner, 2002). This means examining how such perceptions are manifested in discourse, rather than being fixed on persons, spaces, or topics as necessary markers of counterpublic status. Although counterpublics emerge in constellations of these elements (as the theoretical framework outlined in this subsection suggests), reductionism manifests if scholars regard a particular person, place, or topic as necessarily defining the limits of a counterpublic (Asen, 2000, p. 426). This does not mean that discourse is the only quality of counterpublics worthy of scholarly examination.[67] Still, critical attention is most productively focused on the communicative qualities of counterpublics when evaluating how they position themselves against wider publics or the state (Asen 2000, p. 437). For example, it would be reductionist to consider a comment section itself a counterpublic, as commenters in a comment section may use different discursive patterns and have a range of different attitudes. It would also be reductionist to focus on identity-based conceptions of groups as a marker of counterpublic status, as it implies that all members of a "group" (e.g. women, workers, immigrants) have the same interests and agree on strategies to promote their interests.

From this it follows that in order to study the prevalence of counterpublics in the Facebook comment sections, it is necessary to analyse what the commenters actually write and to evaluate to what extent the comments are marked by

[67] While Asen (2002, pp. 430–435) warns against the reductionism of using these three elements to determine what a counterpublic is, he still underlines the value of studying persons, spaces, and topics to see how they enter and circulate within the public sphere.

elements of counterpublic discourse. To measure the prevalence of these subpublics, then, it is necessary to define counterpublic discourse.

Drawing on Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, p. 471), who based on the theoretical literature about counterpublics identify three characteristics of counterpublic discourse, counterpublic discursive patterns are here understood as talk that:

(1) sets itself off from a superordinate public sphere which it explicitly deconstructs as being mainstream and dominant (*deconstructing power relations*, see Asen, 2000; Downey & Fenton, 2003); or
(2) puts forward arguments that challenge the consensus of this superordinate public sphere (*argumentative countering*, see Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002); or
(3) seeks to strengthen a sense of collective identity among the supporters of the subordinate public sphere (*strengthening identity*, see Dahlberg, 2011; Fraser, 1990).

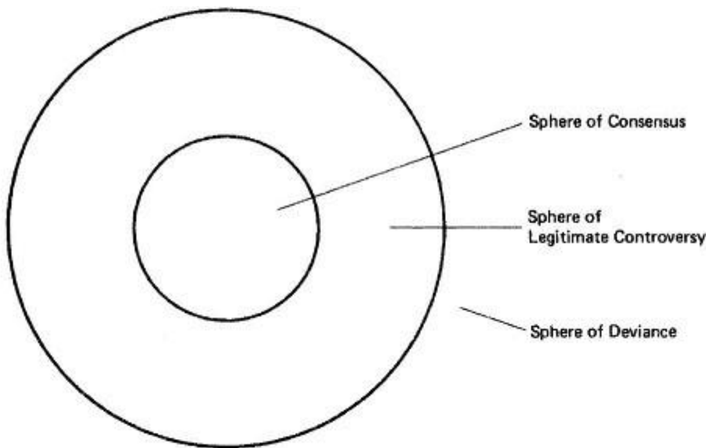
We will see in more detail how these three characteristics of counterpublic discourse were operationalised in this study in the following chapter. Before outlining the methodology, though, some additional theoretical perspectives are addressed. Unlike the three characteristics of counterpublic discourse described above, the following perspectives do not form the basis of the variables used in the content analysis but provide additional insights for discussing and making sense of the data. These are the concepts of the spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance (Hallin, 1986) and the theory of corrective action (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang et al., 2008; Rojas, 2010). We start with Hallin's spheres.

Hallin's Spheres

In his book *The Uncensored War* (1986) about press coverage during the Vietnam War, Daniel Hallin examines the claim that during the Vietnam War the news media played an oppositional role to official US policy. He finds that critical news coverage

occurred not until after parts of the American political elite turned against the war. Thus, the event perhaps most cited as a case of news media influence on government policy actually is a case of political elites becoming divided over policy and news media coverage simply being a reflection of this (Robinson, 2001, p. 526). Based on these findings, Hallin (1986) develops the concept of three spheres, one of consensus, one of legitimate controversy, and one of deviance. These exist in relation to any given political issue.

Figure 3.1: Spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance (Hallin, 1986, p. 117)



As shown in figure 3.1, he represents the spheres by a figure showing concentric circles, where the sphere of consensus is found in the centre, the sphere of deviance is found outside the circle, and the sphere of legitimate controversy is found between the spheres of consensus and deviance (Hallin, 1986, pp. 116–117). Each sphere represents levels of how acceptable certain political views and actors are in the eyes of the political mainstream and journalists. Within the *sphere of consensus* are those views and actors not regarded by journalists and most of society as controversial. Within this sphere, journalists do not feel bound to present opposing views or to remain disinterested reporters. On the contrary, the journalist's role is to serve as an advocate of generally agreed-upon values. Within the *sphere of*

legitimate controversy, electoral contests and legislative debates take place. People may have (very) different views within this sphere, but this disagreement is considered valid. Objectivity and balance are therefore dominating journalistic virtues within this region. Beyond the sphere of legitimate controversy lies the *sphere of deviance*, consisting of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard (Hallin, 1986, p. 117). Within this sphere, neutrality once again falls away, and journalism becomes a "boundary-maintaining mechanism":[68] "It plays the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable political conflict" (Hallin, 1986, p. 117).

Hallin's model recognises that it is the media that police the boundaries between the different spheres. In other words, the media have the power to decide whether to place actors and viewpoints within the different spheres (Taylor, 2014, p. 40). Importantly, each sphere has internal gradations, and the boundaries between them are often fuzzy. Within the sphere of legitimate controversy, for instance, near the border of the sphere of consensus, journalists practice objective journalism, where objectivity entails a pure recitation of official statements. Farther out, as the news media discuss issues on which consensus is weaker, the "adversary" ideal of the journalist as an independent investigator who holds powerful actors to account is emphasised (Hallin, 1986, pp. 117–118).

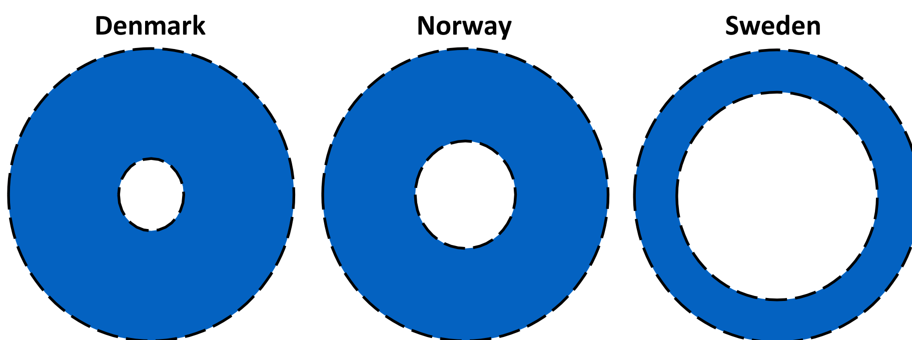
It is worth noting that there is great disagreement pertaining to how the spheres are defined in Scandinavian debates on Islam and immigration. As we have seen in the subsections on counterpublics, there are both Islam-sceptic and Islam-sympathetic actors who perceive their views to be in opposition to the mainstream, illustrating the contested character of the limits of the debate. Defining the spheres is further

[68] Parsons quoted in Hallin (1986, p. 117).

complicated by the fact that they are dynamic, depending on the political climate and on the editorial line of the various media outlets (Hallin, 1986). In other words, the spheres can expand and contract over time. This is, for instance, illustrated by the shift in Swedish discourse following the 2015 refugee crisis, which led to intense political discussions around religion and migration (Demker, 2018, p. 393). In today's media landscape, the many channels available for meta-debates mean that participants in debates around Islam and immigration regularly experience these vague borders between "inappropriate and "appropriate" topics and viewpoints (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b, p. 433).

While this study acknowledges that the spheres are contested, dynamic, and vague, there is little doubt that the three spheres have been defined differently in the Scandinavian countries when it comes to discussions around Islam and immigration. This is illustrated in the figure(s) below, which are based on the discussions in Chapter 2.

Figure 3.2: Spheres of consensus (white), legitimate controversy (blue), and deviance (outside the concentric circles) in Scandinavian debates on Islam, immigration, and integration before 2015 refugee crisis



In Denmark, where the Danish People's Party has had considerable influence on discourse since the mid-1990s, the acceptance of Islam- and immigrant-negative opinions have been the norm rather than the exception. As indicated by figure 3.2, consensus in Danish debates on Islam, immigration, and integration has been highly

limited, and thus a wide range of opinions have been considered legitimate. The fact that the major parties already in the latter half of the 1990s adopted some of DF's anti-Islam rhetoric contributed to redefining the spheres relatively early compared to in Norway and Sweden. Since then, and particularly after 9/11, negative discourse on Islam in the Danish public sphere has moved closer and closer from the sphere of legitimate controversy to the sphere of consensus. Positive views towards Islam have correspondingly moved the other way in Hallin's model, i.e. from well within the sphere of legitimate controversy to moving towards the edge of the sphere of legitimate controversy. Some also argue that positive opinions about Islam or criticism of anti-Islam rhetoric can be considered deviant in Danish public discourse.[69] In fact, Hervik (2018, p. 10) argues that in all the Nordic countries apart from Sweden, race and racism are tabooed words, that "are not used due to political correctness, particularly when talking about anti-Muslim or anti-Islam racial slurs."

The Norwegian public sphere is, as we have seen, found between the Swedish and Danish public spheres in terms of the attitudes that have been expressed towards Islam and immigration. Since the 1980s, the Progress Party has impacted political, media, and public discourse, and over time, the repetitive, controversial statements made by members of the party led to perspectives that earlier bordered the deviant sphere gradually becoming accepted (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b, p. 435). Still, radical right-wing actors, including members of the FrP, do not seldom make statements that are widely condemned by other parties and the media commentariat, such as claiming that Norway is victim to "sneak Islamisation"[70] and that another crusade may be necessary to handle Islam.[71] The consensus of

[69] For instance, journalist and author Carsten Jensen contends this in an interview in Omdal (2018, pp. 187–188).
[70] https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/vQbPVX/dette-er-snikislamisering
[71] https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/politikk/i/MGraB/2011-jeg-frykter-for-at-et-nytt-korstog-blir-noedvendig-i-dag-ny-justisminister

Norwegian debates on Islam and immigration has been relatively limited compared to in Sweden but more limited than in Denmark. According to Figenschou and Beyer (2014b, p. 434), there has only been consensus about fundamental principles such as that skin colour or race should not decide how people are treated, and that basic human rights should be respected.

Islam- and immigration-negative views in Sweden, notably represented by the Sweden Democrats, have largely been found in the sphere of deviance. The political establishment and mainstream media have described these positions and actors as xenophobic, racist, fascist, and Nazi, thus keeping them outside the sphere of legitimate controversy. The large consensus has been marked by positive views towards Islam, multiculturalism, and immigration. Describing the difficulty of challenging the strong consensus in Swedish discourse on various topics, including immigration, political scientist Henrik Oscarsson (2013) coined the term "opinion corridor" (*åsiktskorridor*). This metaphor is closely related to Hallin's spheres (1986) and illustrates that there has been little room for legitimate debate about issues that people have markedly different opinions on than what is reflected in public debate. While not indicated in figure 3.2, the Swedish spheres (or, to use Oscarsson's terminology, opinion corridor) have clearly been redefined following the 2015 refugee crisis, as Islam- and immigrant-critical views have become more legitimate, and the sphere of consensus has contracted substantially. Today, the debate climate is more similar to that of its Scandinavian neighbours (Brochmann, 2018), although the Sweden Democrats was shunned by the other parties until 2019.

In line with an international development, the Scandinavian countries have seen the emergence of more and less deviant anti-Islam actors online, marked especially by alternative news outlets. These outlets are often criticised by politicians and media professionals for spreading hate, lacking journalistic integrity, and having a low

regard for facts.[72] In response, they actively portray themselves as victims of political censorship and consensus culture, to the extent that they have been forced to create their own publics (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b, p. 436). These news sites are central actors in the anti-Islam counterpublics found in the three countries, sometimes being able to put issues on the political agenda that the established news media have been reluctant to or not deemed important. Like right-wing populist parties, their content is widely shared through social media (Hedman et al., 2018). At the same time, unlike the right-wing populist parties, the most radical anti-Islamic news outlets do not strive to enter the sphere of legitimate controversy, as they consider the established news media and political establishment to be a lost cause. Instead, they choose to remain in the sphere of deviance, communicating their message to a substantial number of devoted readers (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014b, p. 436).

Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019, p. 1225), describing the Norwegian context, argue that anti-Islamic news sites can be said to lie on the border of the sphere of legitimate controversy, i.e. they are sometimes invited into mainstream public debate but are generally dismissed for being too radical. This can arguably also be said about the Danish alternative right-wing media, whereas the Swedish alternative news sites more clearly find themselves in the sphere of deviance, i.e. journalists and the political mainstream (generally) dismiss them as unworthy of being heard (Hallin, 1986, p. 117). At the same time, this type of outlet is more popular among the Swedish than the Norwegian and Danish populations (Reuters Institute, 2019), indicating that the relatively mild Swedish debate climate has been conducive to online actors seeking to challenge the substantial consensus around Islam and

[72] See for instance
https://journalisten.dk/ros-men-mest-kritik-til-den-korte-avis/
https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/4-svenska-hatsajter---det-behover-du-veta/
https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/det-farlige-muslimhatet/70884939

immigration (Heft et al, 2019). For the same reason, Islam-critical counterpublic discourses are expected to be highly prevalent in the comment sections of Swedish news outlets examined in this study.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, however, Facebook affordances related to, for instance, moderation policies mean that the comment sections on the Facebook pages of established news media likely will not feature the most deviant opinions. Still, the relatively low threshold for getting one's opinions published in comment sections compared to in more traditional media formats such as letters to the editor (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012) speak in favour of counterpublic-minded individuals' active participation, as they seek to challenge mainstream audiences and expand the sphere of legitimate controversy.

Corrective Action

It may be useful to think of citizens' commenting activity as a form of corrective action in order to understand differences between the countries' comment sections. While inspired by the corrective action hypothesis (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang et al., 2008; Rojas, 2010), which has found that people who perceive media to be biased and influential will be more likely to take action to "correct" for this in the public sphere, the term corrective action is here used more broadly. Rather than linking it strictly to presumed media bias and influence, it is assumed that commenters also are likely to take action to correct political discourse and viewpoints in the public sphere more generally. For instance, in the same way that someone may perceive media to be biased and have influence over others, someone may think that the political establishment or public sphere in general are dominated by overly Islam-friendly perspectives that impact how others view Islam. Whether these perceptions are right or wrong, they may prompt people to engage politically in various ways to correct for these (perceived) phenomena, to prevent others from being swayed by these opinions.

The corrective action perspective may be considered to be at odds with the "spiral of silence" theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), which predicts that those who perceive their opinions to be in the minority will be less likely to express themselves due to fear of social isolation. Researchers have pointed out, however, that these theories do not necessarily clash, but rather operate under nuanced circumstances and contexts (Duncan et al., 2020, p. 192). For instance, Tsfati and Cohen (2005) find that perceived negative coverage of Israeli settlers makes those settlers more willing to forcibly resist the government. Tsafti (2007), on the contrary, shows another effect among minority Arab groups in Israel, who feel more alienated as a result of media hostility perception and presumed media influence. In addition to socio-political contexts, personality traits such as outspokenness influence willingness to speak up against perceived bias (McKeever, McKeever, & Li, 2017).

Moreover, there are differences between political partisans and those with moderate opinions. Political partisans, especially those who have strong opinions, are not likely to alter their stances when confronted with oppositional arguments (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009) and are relatively willing to participate in discussions in comment sections that oppose their opinion (Duncan et al., 2020). Centrists, however, are susceptible to group preferences and more likely to conform to the perceived opinion climate (Mutz, 1992). They are also less likely to write in comment sections than political partisans (Kalogeropoulos et al, 2017). At the same time, it has been found that centrists' willingness to comment is not dependent on whether they agree or disagree with the dominant opinion, i.e. they do not seem to be victim to a spiral of silence (Duncan et al., 2020, p. 198).

Overall, the reason for adopting the corrective action perspective in this study rather than that of a spiral of silence is largely based on political partisans' high commenting activity and willingness to correct discourse they disagree with, in combination with centrists generally low commenting activity (Duncan et al., 2020;

Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). Furthermore, corrective action as a theoretical lens harmonises well with viewing comment sections as providing significant affordances for counterpublic-minded individuals, who for various reasons may have a strong incentive to use these arenas to correct for perceived "wrongs" in the public sphere. This includes for instance the fact that comment sections provide a good opportunity to challenge a wider, mainstream audience. At the same time, it is recognised that many choose not to participate in the comment sections, not necessarily because they are afraid of social isolation due to disagreeing with perceived dominant opinions (i.e. spiral of silence), but because they view comment sections as places ridden with impolite speech and harassment (Burkal & Veledar, 2018).

If the corrective action perspective is predictive of the results in this dissertation, it can be expected that Islam-critical comments will dominate the Swedish comment sections, given the relatively strong presence of Islam-positive discourse in the Swedish public sphere, while there will be fewer Islam-critical comments in the Danish comment sections, given the relatively strong presence of Islam-negative discourse in the Danish public sphere. Correspondingly, the opposite will be the case for Islam-positive comments, i.e. they will be relatively marginal in the Swedish case and relatively prevalent in the Danish case. Norwegian comments, due to the Norwegian public sphere being in a position between the Swedish and Danish one when it comes to debates on Islam, are expected to be found in a position between the two.

Still, it is worth reiterating that the element of perception is key. Those expressing that e.g. the political establishment or mainstream media is afraid "to tell the truth" about Islam are here understood to be self-perceived correctives. For instance, Danes may view national discourse on Islam and immigration as overly friendly, despite the fact that research points to the opposite. Also, Swedes may view the

national discourse on Islam as fundamentally racist, even if most research describes the Swedish public sphere as the least critical to Islam and immigration among the Scandinavian countries (see Chapter 2).

Viewing Scandinavian debate on Islam more generally through the lens of the corrective action perspective, the radical right populist parties have been central in "correcting" the discourse. In all the three countries, although only very recently in Sweden, they have contributed to moving perspectives on Islam and immigration from the sphere of deviance to the sphere of legitimate controversy, and they have done so by, among other things, targeting the other political parties and the established news media. All the three major Scandinavian radical right populist parties have for instance attacked the fully state-owned public broadcasters for having a left-wing agenda.[73] They have also used social media strategically to communicate their messages unfiltered to the audience (and in some cases to interact with supporters) (Kalsnes, 2019), generating levels of engagement that are unmatched by the other parties. The same description applies not least to anti-Islamic news outlets, who, as we have seen, brand themselves as a corrective to the biased and "politically correct" mainstream media (Holt, 2018), which is considered to hide the truth about the dangers posed by (Muslim) immigrants (Nygaard, 2019).

Progressive actors have also taken corrective action in response to what they have perceived as an essentialising and problem-fixated public discourse on Islam and immigration. A good example of this is the Danish grassroots movement *Venligboerne* ("The Friendly Neighbours"), founded in 2013, whose aim is to build bridges between people and to make refugees feel welcome in Denmark.[74] Starting

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[73] See for instance
https://www.di.se/nyheter/sd-politiker-till-attack-mot-public-service-flum-och-trams/
https://jyllands-posten.dk/politik/ECE11423153/politikere-undrer-sig-publikum-ved-stor-drdebat-bliver-kaldt-biased/
https://www.nrk.no/ytring/nrk-er-ark-1.12331371

[74] https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/regionale/nordjylland/venligboerne-spreder-sig-til-ungarn

as a local initiative in the remote town of Hjørring, *Venligboerne* (VB) spread through social media, becoming an international movement. In Denmark, membership numbers reached 150,000 in less than a year, primarily accounted through Facebook group memberships, one of the core organising principles of the movement (Koukouzelis, 2019). The movement's activities are based on three guiding principles: (1) be friendly in the meeting with others, (2) be curious when you meet people who are different from you, and (3) meet diversity with respect (Siim & Meret, 2019, p. 37). Central for VB has been the attempt to challenge the distinction between "Dane" and "refugee" (Nygaard, 2017). While the Hjørring segment of the movement prefers to focus on the local and everyday character of the activities, Copenhagen VB prefers a critical political approach that includes criticising the governments' asylum, migration, and integration policies (Siim & Meret, 2019, p. 37). As such, they have chosen different strategies to "correct" for opposition to accommodating refugees and asylum seekers in Denmark.

Chapter Summary

Based on critical examinations of Habermas's pivotal study of the structural transformation of the public sphere, researchers have identified what are called counterpublics (Felski, 1990; Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993). While there are several definitions of counterpublics, the one provided by Fraser (1990) has been particularly influential. Noting how women, workers, peoples of colour, and LGBTQ people have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics, Fraser (1990) defined what she called "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Counterpublics have twofold aims: one marked by inwards-oriented goals (formulating alternative identities, interests, and needs), and another marked by outwards-oriented goals

(shifting consensus structures within dominant publics) by engaging larger publics and targeting dominant publics with "counterpublicity" (Asen, 2000, p. 441).

Although existing literature on counterpublics has largely focused on progressive and left-wing actors, counterpublics can also have a right-wing or extreme-right ideology (e.g. Cammaerts, 2009). This is exemplified by Scandinavian debates on Islam and immigration, where both left-wing and right-wing actors position themselves as correctives to powerful publics. Therefore, counterpublics may be best understood as self-perceived correctives, rather than groups or movements that are "objectively" marginalised from the public sphere at large. A related, key point is that the "counter" in counterpublics is best examined through analysing discourse, because reductionism manifests if people (e.g. all black people or all women) or particular spaces (e.g. comment sections and blogs) are considered counterpublics (Asen, 2000, p. 437).

Drawing on Toepfl & Piwoni's (2015, p. 471) definition of counterpublic discourse, counterpublic discourse is here understood as talk that: (1) sets itself off from a superordinate public sphere which it explicitly deconstructs as being mainstream and dominant (*deconstructing power relations*); (2) puts forward arguments that challenge the consensus of this superordinate public sphere, and (3) seeks to strengthen a sense of collective identity among the supporters of the subordinate public sphere (*strengthening identity*) (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 471). These characteristics are used in the content analysis of the comments to evaluate the prevalence of counterpublic discourses.

This chapter has also addressed Hallin's (1986) spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance. While there is no doubt that the spheres are contested and vague, they have been defined quite differently in the Scandinavian countries when it comes to debates around Islam and immigration. Sweden has stood out with its considerable consensus and strong boundary-maintaining mechanism

practiced by mainstream media and the political establishment to keep Islam- and immigrant-critical actors in the sphere of deviance (see also Chapter 2).

The corrective action perspective may be useful to explain differences between the countries' comment sections. Drawing on this perspective, it is predicted that citizens' comments will display a principally opposite sentiment towards Islam from the general Scandinavian public spheres. Actors from the far left to the far right have sought to "correct" perceived "wrongs" in the public discourse on Islam and immigration to avoid others being swayed by these opinions, and comment sections represent another opportunity to do just that.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Chapter 4 describes the methodological approach, with particular emphasis on how the comments are analysed using the counterpublic framework outlined in the previous chapter. The chapter begins, though, with discussing the relevant ethical considerations of studying comment sections on social media. Second, it addresses data selection and collection, both with respect to posts and comments. Third, it gives a brief description of the main tenets of quantitative content analysis, including how to measure (intercoder) reliability. Finally, the chapter explains the variables used in the quantitative content analysis of the posts and comments.

Ethical Considerations When Researching Comment Sections on Social Media

The massive and increasing numbers of people engaging with social media[75] have led to massive amounts of data on any number of topics, ranging from consumer behaviours to attitudes on political issues, being available "at the click of a button". While the opportunities that these developments facilitate for researchers are momentous, they are not without ethical challenges (Golder, Ahmed, Norman, & Booth, 2017; Townsend & Wallace, 2016), particularly relating to researchers' responsibility to respect social media users' right to privacy.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide an extensive discussion of ethical considerations related to social media studies in general, I focus on two central considerations that I deem particularly relevant to the study at hand and that are also emphasised in the academic literature on the ethics of social media research (e.g. Golder et al., 2017; Fossheim & Ingierd, 2015; Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013). One ethical consideration pertains to whether researchers should be required to *inform and obtain consent* from their social media data subjects. The other relates to the *dissemination of the research results* in

[75] https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/

relation to the use of quotes, which may enable the identification of data subjects due to the persistent and searchable nature of Internet communication (Boyd, 2008). I view these ethical considerations as related, because, for instance, presenting the data in a way that may enable the identification of a data subject may necessitate obtaining consent.

While it is widely accepted in the social sciences that ethical research will aim to obtain informed consent from all participants involved, informed consent may be difficult to obtain in online contexts (NESH, 2019; Willis, 2019), particularly in studies with thousands or hundreds of thousands of data subjects. This is relevant for this study, which analyses comments published by several thousand Facebook users. At the same time, due to the importance of obtaining informed consent, some scholars have argued that a study of public information should not be carried out if informed consent cannot be obtained (see e.g. Duncan, 1996). Similarly, Hoser and Nitschke (2010) argue in relation to the use of social media data that nobody else than the intended audience, i.e. the social media community in question, should be allowed to use the data generated in such a site, unless consent is obtained. They point out that, “Researchers are probably not the audience an average user intends to reach by his or her postings and serving as a research object is normally not the purpose an average user has in mind when posting on a social network site or in a newsgroup” (Hoser & Nitschke, 2010, pp. 185–186).

Generally, though, there is wide acceptance for a more flexible approach that considers the individual characteristics of each project (see e.g. Elgesem, 2015; Townsend & Wallace, 2016; Willis, 2019). This view is also reflected in the guidelines for internet research outlined by The Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), which describes that the requirement to inform and obtain consent from the research subjects depends on the ethical assessment of four factors: (1) the *accessibility in the public sphere*, (2)

the *sensitivity of the information*, (3) the *vulnerability of the participants* and (4) the *interaction with the participants* (NESH, 2019, p. 13). In addition, the *dissemination of research results* should be considered (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Following this more flexible approach supported by NESH, it will in the next paragraphs be evaluated how these factors relate to the study at hand.

With respect to *accessibility in the public sphere*, this dissertation studies online comments published on public Facebook pages. Such studies have lower requirements related to informing the data subjects and obtaining consent than studies of private (and more blurred private-public) online settings do, because the information may reasonably be considered to have a wider intended audience (NESH, 2019, p. 10). The fact that the Facebook pages of the selected news outlets for this study are "liked" and "followed" by several hundred thousand Facebook users underlines the public nature of the studied arenas. While it is likely true, as Hoser and Nitschke (2010) argue, that people who partake in these (public) discussions do not expect their statements to be studied by a researcher, neither is it a reasonable expectation, given the context, that the information will not be used in research (Elgesem, 2015, p. 26). This can be contrasted with, for instance, a study of a small, private Facebook group, where individuals have a reasonable expectation that their communication will not be used in research, given the private context of the channel. In the latter case, using the communication in research will demand obtaining consent, while in the former, not obtaining consent can be justified due to the information's accessibility in the public sphere.

As for the *sensitivity of the information,* opinions on political issues are generally less sensitive than information of a more personal nature (for instance related to mental or physical health). At the same time, Islam is arguably one of the more sensitive topics of political debate in the Scandinavian public spheres. The high occurrence of hate speech in online debates on Islam (and immigration) (Burkal & Veledar, 2018)

serves as an illustration. It is understandable if people who have published a comment do not want to be associated with that comment in a dissertation or other form of publication, for instance if the comment is harsh or aggressive. Thus, the way the results are disseminated becomes relevant for whether consent should be required.

The ethics related to *dissemination of research results* are particularly relevant with respect to the use of quotes: is it ethical to quote comments from public, popular Facebook pages discussing Islam without obtaining consent? I would argue that this depends on *the likelihood of the quote leading to identification* of the commenter and the *value in using quotes in the presentation of the results*. When presenting the findings from the studied comments on Islam, it was found in this study that while synthesising the communication was sometimes adequate, quotes proved valuable in illustrating several types of comments and made the presentation more vibrant and authentic. It was therefore desirable from the researcher's perspective to use quotes. Using "composite narratives" (Davidson & Letterby, 2014) where quotes are rewritten to avoid searchability was considered, but because this strategy involves the modification of data, which necessarily reduces data quality (Hård af Segerstad, Howes, Kasperowski, & Kullenberg, 2016, p. 222), the decision was made to stick with quotes. In order to pay due caution to the data subjects, metadata such as Facebook page and post link were not cited.[76] Only the nationality of the commenter was mentioned, because this was unlikely to contribute to identifying the commenter and because nationality could be important for the dissemination of the results related to describing differences between Norway, Sweden, and

[76] The link to the associated article of the post (i.e. the associated item published on the main website of the news outlet) was cited in a footnote when relevant. The post link was, however, never cited.

Denmark. Furthermore, quotes were translated from Scandinavian languages into English,[77] meaning they were not searchable.

When it comes to the case of the *vulnerability of the research subjects*, this is hard to evaluate when studying a high number of online comments, written by many data subjects with various backgrounds. For instance, children and adolescents who participate in research are entitled to special protection (NESH, 2019, p. 12), and although the vast majority of Facebook users are adults, children above 13 are allowed to use the platform, and, due to trivial prevention methods, more than 20 million users below the age of 13 are also estimated to be using Facebook (Lee, 2017). It was therefore difficult, if not impossible, to guarantee that children did not author some of the comments in the studied material, which entailed an extra responsibility to ensure that the data were safeguarded. Therefore, the collected data were anonymised and kept on a password-restricted PC.

There was no *interaction with the research participants* in this study, i.e. the researcher did not participate in the exchange of opinions. A study with no interaction between researcher and research participants may be exempted from the obligation to inform and obtain consent (McKee, 2009; NESH, 2019), although, as we have seen, this depends on several factors.

Overall, then, the decision was made *not* to inform and obtain consent from the data subjects. This can be justified by the fact that the information is highly accessible in the public sphere and that the researcher had no interaction with the research participants. In order to account for potentially sensitive communication and the potential participation of children or adolescents, concerns related to storage (i.e. anonymising the data and keeping it on a password-restricted PC) and

[77] All quotes were translated by the researcher, a native Norwegian speaker with good command of English, who studied in the UK for three years at undergraduate level. The researcher also has good comprehension of Swedish and Danish, languages which are similar to Norwegian.

searchability were addressed in order to avoid identification. While quotes were used because of their valuable role in the presentation of the results, they were translated into another language, and metadata such as post link and date of publication were not presented, which served to limit the likelihood of the Facebook users being identified. Based on these considerations, the project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Data Selection and Collection

The 5 news outlets from each country with the highest number of “followers” on their Facebook pages were selected for analysis. These are *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Norsk rikskringkasting* (*NRK)*, *TV2,* and *Verdens Gang (VG)* from Norway; *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Nyheter24, Sveriges Television (SVT),* and *TV4* from Sweden; and *B.T.*, *Danmarks Radio (DR)*, *Ekstra Bladet*, *Politiken,* and *TV2* from Denmark. The outlets’ most popular Facebook pages have between 265,000 and 592,000 followers (early 2019), indicating that a substantial proportion of the relatively small Scandinavian populations follow what these outlets post on Facebook (albeit not necessarily actively). By focusing on the most followed news media, the study analyses content from the Scandinavian news outlets whose reach on Facebook can be presumed to be the largest.

Table 4.1: Type of news media included in the study

News media	**Type**
NRK, SVT, DR	Traditional public service broadcaster
Aftenposten, Politiken	Broadsheet
Dagbladet, VG, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Nyheter 24, B.T., Ekstra Bladet	Tabloid
TV2 (NO), TV4, TV2 (DK)	Hybrid broadcaster

The selected news media could be placed into four groups: (1) traditional public service broadcasters (PSBs), which are financed by the state and carry no

advertising; (2) broadsheets; (3) tabloids; and (4) hybrid broadcasters (HSBs)—i.e. terrestrial free-to-air broadcasters with commercial funding plus must-carry privileges and some co-regulated public service obligations (Lund & Berg, 2009, p. 21). As shown in table 4.1, tabloids were the most represented type of news media.

It is worth noting that the profiled Swedish broadsheet *Dagens Nyheter* is not one of the top 5 most followed Swedish news media on Facebook and was thus not included in the study, unlike Norwegian broadsheet *Aftenposten* and Danish broadsheet *Politiken*. This may have some implications for the results, as broadsheets tend to have a less sensationalist style than tabloids do. For instance, it is possible it could lead to a relatively higher focus on negatively loaded themes like Jihadism, crime, and honour culture in the Swedish posts than what would have been the case if *Dagens Nyheter* had been included. To the extent that commenters are influenced by the content to which they are responding, this may also affect what people write about Islam in the comment sections. The benefit of basing the selection on popularity is that it enables the study of counterpublic discourses in near proximity to the presumably most influential Scandinavian news outlets on Facebook. The fact that five news media from each country were chosen, rather than for instance two to three, may alleviate the impact that the lack of a broadsheet in the Swedish selection can be expected to have on the comparative findings.

As we have seen, this study focuses on Facebook. Therefore, if an article or video was published on the news media's main website but not on one of its Facebook pages, the item would not be included in this study. Most Facebook posts published by the news outlets did, however, have a link to an article on the outlet's main website, and these articles were included in the analysis.

All identified Facebook pages administered by the selected media outlets were included, except for those focused on geographical regions within the countries (e.g.

NRK Nordland, *TV2 Østjylland*), the emphasis of this study being on national rather than regional and local discussions. Some outlets have numerous Facebook pages, while others have only two or three. Most have what may be considered a main Facebook page using just the name of the outlet (e.g. *Aftenposten*, *VG*, *Ekstra Bladet*), which typically has the most followers. Other Facebook pages are related to different TV or radio channels associated with the outlets (e.g. *DR1*, *DR2*), certain tv or radio shows (e.g. *NRK Brennpunkt*, *DR Detektor*), topics (e.g. *Aftenposten Politikk*, *B.T. Underholdning*, *Expressen Kultur*), and genres (e.g. *Aftonbladet Ledare*, *Dagbladet Meninger*, *SVT Dokumentär*).

Posts on the 15 news media's Facebook pages from 1 June–31 December 2018 that included at least one of the following search words in their title or introductory description were selected for analysis:[78] "allah", "burka", "burqa", "fatwa", "hijab", "imam", "islam", "koran", "mekka", "medina", "mohammed", "muhammed", "mohammad", "muhammad", "muslim", "moske", "moské", "mufti", "mujahedin", "mullah", "nikab", "niqab", "quran", "sharia", "slør", "slöj", "tørklæde".[79] The search words were based on those used by Baker et al (2013, p. 28), who studied the representation of Islam in the British press, albeit they were adjusted to the Scandinavian languages and contexts. The selected period (1 June–31 December 2018) was chosen with the aim of analysing relatively recent discourse on Islam. The downside of studying a single period is that one is vulnerable to period-specific events impacting the results. For this study, this means that it is necessary to especially consider how the Danish ban of face-covering clothing and the Swedish elections that were held in the studied period may have impacted some of the findings.

[78] All forms of the words were included (e.g. also Islamist, Islamists, and Islamism in addition to Islam).

[79] *Slør*, *slöj*, and *tørklæde* are Scandinavian words for headscarf.

Data that met the selected criteria were identified through a two-step approach. First, the social media data service Twingly was used. Twingly returns a collection of Facebook posts matching a specified query, which in this case was based on the previously mentioned selection criteria. Seven such queries were made—one each month—as Twingly restricts gathering data to one month back in time. Second, a manual search was done on all relevant Facebook pages to look for posts matching the selection criteria to check if there were posts that had not been identified by Twingly. After completing these steps, all the identified posts were read to confirm that they dealt with Islam or Muslims. Except for some items that mentioned the name Muhammed and Medina in nonrelevant contexts, the posts identified were considered relevant (N=602).[80]

While all 602 posts (and their associated articles) were analysed, the decision was made to focus on a selection of the several hundred thousand comments responding to the posts. Only original comments were selected, i.e. comments replying directly to the posts published by the news outlets rather than comments replying to comments written by other ordinary citizens. The rationale for this is that original comments are typically those that engage most clearly with the content in the posts (and the wider public sphere) and were therefore most relevant for analysing the relationship between the (counterpublic) subspheres operating within the comment sections and the more powerful subpublic operating in the posts, represented by the established news media. The direct conversation between citizens in the comment sections is thus not considered here (cf. Andersen, 2019 for a study on rhetorical perspectives on Scandinavian citizens discussing the

[80] After having carried out the selection process a second time in the final stage of the dissertation to see how many of the total number of posts published by the news media were about Islam, 36 relevant posts that had not been originally identified were found. These posts were checked for their theme and sentiment to see whether they deviated from the 602 originally identified posts, and it was found that they did not. Because including these would not have changed the results, the decision was made to focus on the 602 posts identified in the first selection round.

immigration issue in the Facebook comment sections of established news media). 10% of the (original) comments replying to each post were selected for analysis but with a maximum of 50 comments from each post in order to avoid the results being affected significantly from replies to a few engaging posts. For instance, if a post had 3000 original replies, 50 comments were coded rather than 300. Correspondingly, a minimum limit of 5 comments per post (unless there were less than 5 comments) was set to facilitate that comments responding to a wide range of posts would be included in the data set. Which 10% of the comments to analyse was based on chronology; the first published comments were selected.[81] Comments that could not be coded, for instance because they were off-topic or too brief for their meaning to be interpreted, were discarded. In total, the described criteria gave 6797 comments to be analysed. Thus, this project analyses 602 Facebook posts (and associated articles) published by established news outlets and 6797 Facebook comments written in response to these.

Quantitative Content Analysis

To analyse the posts and comments, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. Kerlinger (1986) defined content analysis as a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. As explained by Østbye, Helland, Knapskog, Larsen, and Moe

[81] Most Facebook pages let you sort comments from newest to oldest. This does, however, not give perfect (reverse) chronology. If the oldest comment (which will be at the bottom when sorting from newest to oldest) receives a reply, it will be moved to the top of the comment section above the newest original replies. It is possible to check exactly when a comment was published by hovering the mouse over a comment, but this is not feasible in the long run when dealing with sometimes thousands of comments. To make the selection as chronological as possible given these challenges, a decision was made to select one comment from the top of the comment section (that had at least one reply) for every fourth comment that was selected from the bottom of the comment section. As such, the selection process was adjusted to the fact that some old comments were pushed to the top of the comment section, although recognising that perfect chronology could not be achieved. The order of comments on the few outlets' Facebook pages that let you sort comments from oldest to newest rather than from newest to oldest is not impacted by replies and shows comments in a perfect chronological order. Thus, no adjustment had to be made in these instances.

(2013, p. 208), the *systematic* character of content analysis means that general rules are formulated for analysing the material, which are described in a so-called codebook. Every selected textual unit (in this case Facebook posts and Facebook comments) is classified ("coded") for every variable. This dissertations' codebooks are found in Appendices 1 and 2, where Appendix 1 pertains to posts and Appendix 2 pertains to comments. *Objectivity* with respect to quantitative content analysis means limiting the influence of a sole person's interpretation. In practice, this is typically done by testing intercoder reliability, i.e. seeing how congruently two or more individuals (coders) judge a subselection of units (see e.g. Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2016). Objectivity in this setting does not imply that the analysis is congruent with "reality", only that reliability is achieved through the consistent coding of two or more individuals (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 208). Intercoder reliability can be measured in a number of ways and there is no consensus on which measure to use (see the following subsection for a description of measuring reliability). The *quantitative* character of a content analysis indicates—as the name suggests—that it is an approach aimed at describing data through numbers (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 208).

When studying nominal data, the values of the analysed variables must be independent, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive. To illustrate this point, Stemler (2001) gives the example of an analysis attempting to code the kinds of courses offered at a particular school, where the coding scheme has five values: mathematics, science, literature, biology, and calculus. This scheme is troubling, because whenever a biology course is coded it would also be coded as a science course. As such, the values are not independent or mutually exclusive. Furthermore, since you are likely to encounter courses at a school that are not found in the coding scheme, for instance courses in foreign language, the values are not exhaustive (Stemler, 2001).

Reliability
The most intuitive and historically most popular coefficient for measuring intercoder reliability is simple percent agreement. In the methodological literature, however, percent agreement is considered a misleading and inappropriately liberal measure of intercoder reliability, as it does not account for the fact that coders are expected to agree with each other a certain percentage of the time simply based on chance (Krippendorf, 2004; Lombard, Snyder-Dutch, & Bracken, 2002; Neuendorf, 2016). For instance, agreement between coders on a variable with only two values (e.g. something is present or absent) is easy to achieve because chance alone could produce agreement half of the time (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005, p. 142). Consequently, numerous coefficients have been developed to take chance agreement into consideration. To measure reliability in this study, I use Cohen's kappa (1960), which is one of the most used chance-correcting coefficients.[82]

The kappa coefficient approaches 1 when coding is perfectly reliable and goes to 0 when there is no agreement other than what would be expected by chance. If it goes below 0, reliability is lower than what could be expected by chance (Stemler, 2001). As explained by Neuendorf (2009), there is no universally agreed-upon minimum levels for the various reliability indexes. Pertaining to Cohen's kappa, Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, and Sinha (1999) argue that a kappa of 0.75+ indicates excellent agreement beyond chance; 0.40–0.75 is fair to good; and below 0.40 is poor agreement. Landis and Koch (1977) hold that a kappa coefficient of 0.81–1.00 indicates almost perfect agreement, 0.61–0.80 is substantial, and 0.41–0.60 is moderate. Kvålseth (1989) describes a kappa coefficient of 0.61 as representing reasonably good overall agreement. Popping (1988) advocates a stricter line and proposes a cutoff criterion of 0.80 for Cohen's kappa. Based on a review of proposed minimum standards for coefficients that take chance into

[82] See e.g. Riffe et al., (2005, p. 155) for a detailed description of how the coefficient is calculated.

consideration, Neuendorf (2016, p. 168) describe that 0.80 or greater would be acceptable to all, 0.60 or greater would be acceptable in most situations, and below that, there exists disagreement. Following general recommendations in the methodological literature, acceptable reliability of the variables in this study was set at 0.60+.

To carry out an inter-coder reliability test in this study, a random selection of 10% of the posts and their associated article texts (n=60) were analysed by another doctoral student. The same doctoral student and a student on undergraduate level carried out individual analyses of a random selection of 5% of the comments (n=340).[83] Their analyses of the posts and comments, respectively, were tested against my analyses to measure intercoder reliability. The coders had limited knowledge about the project and were trained in the relevant coding scheme (one for posts, one for comments) before carrying out the analysis. The software package SPSS was used to calculate the kappa coefficients.

Post variables

In the analysis of the Facebook posts—the main variables source, theme, genre, sentiment (towards Islam), and popularity cues (i.e. the number of shares, comments, likes, and newer forms of Facebook reactions) were coded.

[83] The undergraduate student carried out an analysis of 393 comments, 5% of N=7859, i.e. the total number of comments if one does not discard the off-topic comments.

Table 4.2: Kappa coefficients for variables related to the analysis of posts

Variable	Kappa
Source—position/role	0.83
…Muslim?	0.81
……"Type" of Muslim perspective	0.85
Theme	0.8
Genre	0.94
Sentiment	0.74
Popularity cues	Not calculated

As depicted in table 4.2, satisfactory intercoder reliability (0.60+), as measured by Cohen's kappa, was achieved for all post variables: source (0.83), theme (0.8), genre (0.94), and sentiment (0.74). Inter-coder reliability was not measured for popularity cues, as coding these was a straight-forward process of simply registering the number on the screen. In addition to a variable that coded the source's position/role, two related variables were coded: whether a source was Muslim (Cohen's kappa 0.81) and whether the Muslim expressed a liberal, conservative, (radical) Islamist, or undefined stance (0.85). In the following, the post variables are described in more detail.

When coding the *source* of a post, only the main source was coded. The first source in a post was coded as the main source, as long as the next source was not given twice as much space (in an article) or time (in a video). To be considered a source in a news post, the person had to be quoted; it was not enough to just be mentioned. For debate articles, the author of the article was coded as a source. In video posts of debates and speeches, the main speaker was coded as a source. Source was thus defined broadly to be found in both news and debate items. The source was coded according to the position he or she appeared as in the post (e.g. politician, civil servant, private citizen).

Also, to measure the representation of Muslim voices, sources were classified as either Muslim, non-Muslim, or unclear. Another variable classified the perspectives that Muslims expressed as either liberal, conservative, (radical) Islamist, or undefined. Admittedly, these characteristics were simplified and far from representative of the wide and eclectic range of views among Muslims, the point being merely to give an impression of the Muslim perspectives that were voiced through the Scandinavian news outlets' Facebook posts. It is worth noting that one by categorising people as e.g. Muslim and non-Muslim and liberal and conservative one risks contributing to the "Othering" one wishes to measure (Eide, 2010; Figenschou & Beyer, 2014a; Fonn, Orgeret, & Simonsen, 2012). People may not want to be primarily presented as a member of a religious group, even though research has found this to be the case to a large degree (e.g. Jacobsen, Jensen, Vitus, & Weibel, 2013). The reason why this study still seeks to measure the presence of Muslim sources, is because it considers it important and necessary to see to which degree Muslims' own perspectives are represented in the news media's coverage on Islam.

With respect to the *theme* variable, the main theme, i.e. the subject most in focus, was coded. If a post contained several themes and there was doubt pertaining to which theme was most prominent, the headline decided which theme would be coded. If the main theme still could not be decided, the picture would determine what to code. In the last instance, the introduction would be the decisive factor. It is worth noting that there were some challenges related to making the theme values mutually exclusive. This pertained to the theme honour culture, a relatively broad value which in public debate is often linked to discussions around the wearing of the hijab and face veils, refusal to shake hands with the opposite sex, among other subjects. In this study, honour culture was coded as a theme on the same level as these other themes. If a post highlighted, on the one hand, that parents forcing their children to wear the hijab was part of a culture marked by honour and social

control, honour culture would be coded as the main theme. On the other hand, if no mention was made of honour culture in such a post, and the focus was on the hijab without linking it explicitly to honour culture, then hijab would be coded as the main theme.

In terms of *genre*, the posts were grouped as either news, debate, or comedy items. News items included (links to) news articles, feature articles, interviews, fact checks, notices, and documentaries. Debate items included (links to) opinion articles, speeches by politicians, and video excerpts from television and radio debates. The third, and by far smallest, group consisted of comedy items, typically taking the form of brief video skits performed by professional comedians.

With respect to *sentiment* towards Islam, four values were used that described the posts' depiction of Islam: negative, positive, neutral, or negatively loaded. The *negatively loaded* value was used to account for posts that were not negative towards Islam or Muslims per se but that focused on a negatively laden theme, such as Islamism, Jihadism, war, honour culture, or crime. A post was coded as *negative* if it conveyed criticism of Islam, Islamic practices, Muslims, immigration (from countries with a substantial Muslim population), and/or Islam/immigration-friendly parties or politicians. A post was not coded as negative if it conveyed criticism of negatively laden themes (in these cases the negatively loaded value was coded)—as long as not the post linked Islam or (most) Muslims to these phenomena. A post was coded as *positive* if it conveyed support, sympathy, respect, or tolerance for Islam, Islamic practices, or Muslims, emphasised problems with other religions than Islam, argued that problems associated with Islam are exaggerated, and/or criticised Islam/immigrant-critical parties or politicians. A post was coded as *neutral* if it conveyed an even mix of positive and negative elements or did not communicate a clear sentiment.

It should be noted that while most of the posts had a neutral tone, the sentiment coded depended on the content reported rather than on whether an article was objective in its coverage. For instance, a post could describe in an impartial and factual manner how a majority of the Norwegian Parliament voted to face-covering clothing in teaching situations, but since the ban seeks to restrict Islamic practices, such a post would be coded as negative. As noted by Benson and Hallin (2007, p. 32), no information can be conveyed without framing as the selection and presentation of facts are often rooted in ideological assumptions.

Besides themes, sources, genres, and sentiment—metadata in the form popularity cues—i.e. the number of shares, comments, likes, and newer forms of Facebook reactions (e.g. "Haha" and "Angry") were coded, the aim being to examine whether there were any patterns in how these were used in response to different content.

Comment variables

The comments written by ordinary Facebook users were coded for the *sentiment* they expressed towards Islam. In addition to being coded as negative, positive, or neutral, a fourth value similar to the one used for the posts was used to account for comments that were not negative towards Islam or Muslims in general but that targeted Islamism, Jihadism, war, honour culture, and/or crime—without blaming these phenomena on Islam or most Muslims.[84] The comments were, like the posts, also coded for the number of popularity cues they received.

The comments were also analysed in line with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3, which was the basis for most of the variables used in the content analysis of the comments. As we saw, counterpublic discursive patterns were defined as featuring three characteristics: (1) *argumentative countering*, (2) *strengthening a sense of collective identity*, and (3) *deconstruction of power relations* (Toepfl &

[84] This value was called anti-Islamist for brevity.

Piwoni, 2015, p. 471). Different ways of operationalising these characteristics were considered.

One potential approach would have been to have defined clear criteria for what constitutes argumentative countering, deconstructing power relations, and strengthening a sense of identity among supporters of the subordinate public. This was the approach used by Toepfl & Piwoni (2015) in their study of the pro-Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD) counterpublic operating in the comment sections of German newspapers, where comments were coded as either counterpublic or mainstream based on whether they challenged or aligned with the consensual anti-AfD content found in the news articles that the comments responded to. The benefit of using this approach is that one can measure the number of counterpublic and mainstream comments, thus enabling the researcher to present a clear result on the extent to which counterpublic discourses permeate the comment sections.

Despite the benefit of the above-mentioned approach, it was found that it would not be feasible in this study to follow this methodology, more specifically in relation with the argumentative countering and strengthening identity categories (this challenge was not present in relation with the deconstructing power relations category).[85] The reason this approach was not viable for these two characteristics of counterpublic discourse is that this is a comparative study of three countries, which, as we saw in Chapter 2, have been marked by significant differences in debates surrounding Islam.[86] This means that what can be considered mainstream speech

[85] Comments featuring this characteristic explicitly targeted a superordinate public (e.g. the mainstream media or political establishment), which clearly indicated that the commenter felt marginalised or excluded from the larger public sphere. As such, these comments were unmistakably counterdiscursive.

[86] Another reason is that it is hard, if not impossible, regardless of national differences, to define firm boundaries for what is legitimate and what is illegitimate speech in the Scandinavian public spheres when it comes to Islam (see Chapter 3). This can be contrasted with a topic like climate change, where one can confidently classify climate change denial as an expression of counterpublic discourse in all the Scandinavian countries.

around Islam is different in the three national contexts. This would have had to be taken into consideration if clear criteria for what constitutes argumentative countering and strengthening a sense of collective identity (among the supporters of the subordinate public) were to be defined. In other words, the coding scheme would have to take certain, often very subtle, distinctions into consideration, and Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish comments would have had to be coded differently, according to the different public spheres in which they operate.

While national variances in the coding scheme could be supported with previous research and empirical data to a certain point (as Chapter 2 and parts of Chapter 3 are a testament to), highly subjective evaluations would likely be unavoidable in several instances. For example, is it mainstream to describe Islam as an inherently violent religion in Denmark but not in Norway? Is it mainstream to describe Islam as a peaceful religion in Sweden but not in Denmark? Does a Swedish commenter arguing that people should be banned from wearing a hijab in parliament engage in counterpublic discourse, while a Danish commenter arguing the same merely reflects mainstream speech? Is it illegitimate to claim that face veils should be entirely banned from public space in Sweden but not in Denmark? These are just a small number of the questions that would have to be answered resolutely when taking an approach that confidently classifies comments as either a part of a counterpublic or as part of a mainstream public. In other words, it should be acknowledged, as we saw in Chapter 3, that Hallin's spheres of opinion are often fuzzy and contested, and that this undoubtedly is the case with respect to Scandinavian debates on Islam.

Rather than immediately classifying a comment as either a part of a mainstream public or a counterpublic, then, an evaluation of to what degree the comment sections in the three countries were permeated by counterpublic discursive patterns was not undertaken until the results were presented. For instance, if 50 Norwegian

comments, 50 Swedish comments, and 50 Danish comments had argued that Islam is an inherently violent religion, it would be coded that 50 comments from each country had described Islam in a negative essentialist way, but no variable would firmly classify whether this was a part of a mainstream- or counter-public discourse. The discussion relating to what the implications of the results are from a counterpublic perspective are instead discussed in relation with the presentation of the findings, with Chapter 2 serving as background for the discussion.

To clarify, this does not mean that the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 is irrelevant to this study. The implication is rather that it is necessary to adapt the framework to the study at hand, more specifically related to two of the three characteristics of counterpublic discourse: argumentative countering and strengthening identity . Let us therefore now consider how these categories were operationalised in this study, including also what made the deconstructing power relations category stand out from the other two. Subsequently, intercoder agreement will be reported.

Argumentative countering?

For each of the three categories of counterpublic discourses, several subcategories were used to more accurately capture the content being articulated.[87] With respect to argumentative countering, this study identified 9 such subcategories. In most cases, each subcategory served as one variable in the coding scheme, [88] and each dealing with a particular topic related to Islam that Facebook users discussed in the comment sections. The subcategories/variables had different numbers of values, depending on the range of views that commenters expressed in relation with the various subcategories.

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[87] Using (sub)categories identified by Toepfl & Piwoni (2015) as a starting point, subcategories were added, removed, and adjusted to fit with the material at hand where necessary.
[88] Two subcategories had two associated variables.

The 9 subcategories were identified because they (a) were relatively frequently addressed by commenters (discussed in relation with at least 10 of the posts) and (b) because they occasionally were met by comments that might be considered to have challenged the (perceived) consensus of the larger public sphere around Islam (i.e. counterpublic discourse). The subcategories are introduced in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: The subcategories of argumentative countering

Subcategories
Islamic practices and traits associated with Islam
Championing other countries
General evaluation of Islam and/or Muslims
Conversion to Islam
Political labelling
Handling of Islamists and jihadists
Harassment of political opponents
Religion in general
Muslim immigration

The first subcategory of argumentative countering coded commenters' opinions to Islamic practices and traits typically associated with Islam. This included attitudes towards fundamental traits of Islam, such as mosques and the Quran, but also attitudes towards more fringe phenomena, like wearing face veils and not shaking hands with members of the opposite sex (subcategory: *Islamic practices and traits associated with Islam*). Two variables were used in relation with this subcategory. The first variable simply noted which Islamic practice(s) was discussed in the comment, while the second noted the actual attitude the commenter expressed towards the practice. Based on the studied material, the following values were used when classifying the commenters' opinions: The Islamic practice/trait associated

with Islam should be banned, it should be banned in certain areas, it should be criticised but not banned, and it should be accepted/tolerated.

The second subcategory of argumentative countering considered whether commenters explicitly[89] supported other countries because of their policies/discourse on Islam (subcategory: *championing other countries*). The subcategory also specified which country this pertained to.

The third subcategory considered whether the commenters gave a general evaluation of Islam and/or Muslims (subcategory: *general evaluation of Islam and/or Muslims*). The values coded for this variable were negative, positive and neutral/nuanced. Negative comments featured negative essentialist/generalising descriptions of Islam and/or Muslims, e.g. "Islam stands for violence and war" and "Unfortunately Muslims are unable to integrate into Western society". Positive comments featured positive essentialist/generalising views of Islam and/or Muslims, such as "Islam stands for peace" and "Muslims are wonderful people". Neutral/nuanced comments emphasised that there are different interpretations of Islam, for instance stating: "Remember that most Muslims do not use a face veil, this is typically only practiced by women who are advocates of Salafism", and "I have only met one Muslim who did not want to shake my hand".

The fourth subcategory of argumentative countering dealt with conversion to Islam (subcategory: *conversion to Islam*). The subcategory/variable had the following values: Conversion to Islam is deeply problematic/idiotic, conversion to Islam is

[89] Only the comments that explicitly mentioned another country, for instance by uttering "Go on, Denmark!" or "We can learn a lot from Austria", used flag emojis of the other country, or that directly stated that their home country should implement the same policy as in the other country, were coded as championing another country. For instance, if a Swedish or Norwegian comment simply stated "great" when responding to a post reporting that face veils would be banned in Denmark, it would not be coded as championing Denmark. Correspondingly, if a Danish comment stated "great" below a Norwegian post reporting that Norway had banned face veils in teaching situations, this would not be coded as championing Norway.

great/unproblematic, and conversion to Islam is challenging (but not deeply problematic/idiotic).

The fifth subcategory considered whether comments used political labels to brand political opponents in a certain way (subcategory: *political labelling*). Examples of the values coded for this variable are Nazi/fascist/racist, Islamist/terrorist, and communist/socialist. Political labels used about those already described as Islamists or Jihadists in the news posts were not coded as engaging in political labelling of political opponents (see the next subcategory for views on Islamists and jihadists). In other words, for this variable, the Islamist/terrorist label was only coded when commenters used them to describe people that the news media had not already described as an Islamist or terrorist.

As was mentioned above, the sixth subcategory of argumentative countering focused on commenters' views on (how to handle) Islamists and jihadists (subcategory: *handling of Islamists and jihadists*). Commenters' views ranged from wanting members of ISIS to be extrajudicially killed to expressing that jihadists should face no punishment for their actions. In between these fringe positions were comments arguing that Islamists and/or jihadists should be deported or lose their citizenship, that they should be imprisoned, and that people who had travelled from Scandinavia to ISIS territory should not be allowed to return, among other views.

The seventh subcategory considered whether commenters had an attitude towards physical and verbal harassment of political opponents (subcategory: *harassment of political opponents*). For the comments that dealt with this topic, the following values were coded: Physical and verbal harassment of political opponents is acceptable towards Muslims, it is acceptable towards people on the far right, or it is (always) unacceptable. Comments expressing that Islamists or Jihadists should be physically or verbally harassed were not coded in relation with this variable (see subcategory 6).

Unlike subcategory four, which focused on general evaluations of Islam and Muslims, the eight subcategory focused on commenters' attitudes towards religion more generally (subcategory: *religion in general*). The comments found within this subcategory ranged from those describing religion as a highly destructive force to comments that emphasised the importance of religious freedom. The most religion-sceptic commenters even argued that religion should be banned or completely removed from public space.

The ninth, and final, subcategory of argumentative countering focused on commenters' attitudes to Muslim immigration (subcategory: *Muslim immigration*). Commenters' standpoints here ranged from wanting Norway/Sweden/Denmark to ban Muslim immigration to arguing for completely open borders, although there were also several commenters who expressed more moderate attitudes.

We have now been presented to 9 subcategories of arguments that the commenters expressed their views on relatively frequently, occasionally engaging in discourse that may be considered to have challenged the sphere of legitimate controversy around Islam, i.e. argumentative countering.

We will now consider how a second category of counterpublic discourse, namely strengthening a sense of collective identity (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 471), was operationalised in this study.

Strengthening identity among likeminded individuals

The strengthening identity category was reformulated from Toepfl & Piwoni's (2015) study to consider all publics operating within the comment sections' efforts to strengthen a sense of collective identity, rather than only those associated with a subordinate (counter)public. The main reason for this is, as was described above, the unfeasibility in this study related to resolutely classifying comments as either a part of a mainstream- or a counter-public. Furthermore, it was found that both commenters with radical views and commenters with moderate views towards

Islam strengthened a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals, which made it interesting to code this characteristic also in relation with more moderate/mainstream comments.

Comments strengthened a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals in 5 ways (see table 4.4), and all could in theory be coded for both neutral, anti-Islam and pro-Islam Facebook users. The values coded for the subcategories/variables were typically "yes" or "no", i.e. the subcategory was either present or not present in the comment.

Table 4.4: The subcategories of strengthening identity

Subcategories
Emotional content
Impolite tone
Political identification
Alarmism
Personal identification

One way that commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity with likeminded individuals was to express emotions, for instance by using words like "great", "tragic", "horrible", or other emotional markers such as exclamation marks, emojis, and caps lock (subcategory: *emotional content*). Clearly sarcastic and ironic comments and comments using swear words were also coded as emotional.

A second way commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity was by mocking or using derogatory characteristics about others, for instance political opponents and Muslims (subcategory: *impolite tone*). Clear-cut examples are "What an idiotic pig", "She is completely braindead", "He is such a Nazi". Comments commanding that people "go home to their country" were also coded as impolite. Comments using swear words were not coded as impolite unless the comment also

ridiculed someone or used derogatory characteristics about political opponents and/or Muslims.

A third way commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity was by identifying with or showing committed support for political parties and politicians (subcategory: *political identification*). Examples were commenters saying, "The New Right has my vote", "Go on, Christian Tybring Gjedde!", and "The Centre Party <3").[90] Comments that showed *some* support for a politician or political party, e.g. "I will not vote for the party, but the SD unfortunately makes some good points", were not coded as having engaged in political identification. Two variables were used in relation with this subcategory. The first variable coded whether a commenter engaged in political identification ("yes" or "no"), while the second coded what type of political party or politician the commenter supported (e.g. radical right populist, conservative, socialist).

A fourth way in which commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals was by expressing an urgent need for taking action against Islam, Muslims, or immigration to avoid a societal collapse (subcategory: *alarmism*). Commenters expressing that they had given up on a solution to such problems (e.g. because they considered it inevitable that Muslims will take over society) were also considered to be engaging in alarmist rhetoric. Alarmism was also expressed by Islam-friendly commenters. As one commenter put it: "…A new great war is imminent. We need a new 1945 to get rid of the extreme Right's madness [here replying to a post about chancellor of Austria Sebastian Kurz]. History has been forgotten and is about to repeat itself". As is illustrated in this example, the Islam/Muslim-sympathetic commenters that engaged in alarmist rhetoric commenters were typically concerned that their country was becoming a police

[90] https://www.tv2.no/a/10845292/

state because of a fixation on restricting Muslims' freedom, or that Muslims in the country would be given the same treatment as Jews during the 1930s and 1940s.

The fifth, and final, subcategory of strengthening identity considered whether commenters used words like "we", "us", "our", or "ours" to indicate a sense of personal belonging to a continent, nation, religion, organisation or other community (subcategory: *personal identification*). This included comments like "Islam is not compatible with our values" and "Why are there so many who are prejudiced against us Muslims? Ask yourself, what has a Muslim ever done to you?". In other words, commenters with diametrically opposed views on Islam were also found within this subcategory.

We have now considered how the five subcategories of strengthening a sense of collective identity were operationalised. In the following subsection, we will explain the subcategories of the third feature of counterpublic discourses, namely deconstruction of power relations.

Deconstructing power relations

Deconstruction of power relations took place in comments that set themselves off from a superordinate public sphere, which they *explicitly* deconstructed as being mainstream, dominant, biased, and/or censoring. As such, this category stands out from how the other two categories of counterpublic discursive patterns are operationalised, as all the comments coded within this category are undoubtedly counterdiscursive. As we will see, these comments directly targeted superordinate publics like the political establishment, the mainstream media, and the criminal justice system for their handling of Islam. As demonstrated in table 4.5 below, 5 subcategories of deconstructing power relations were coded. Each subcategory corresponded to one variable in the coding scheme. The values coded were either "yes" or "no", meaning that the subcategory was either present or not present in a comment.

Table 4.5: The subcategories of deconstructing power relations

Subcategories
Political establishment
Mainstream media
Criminal justice system
Other actors
Unspecified actors

One way the commenters deconstructed power relations was by criticising the political establishment (subcategory: *political establishment*). Anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim commenters did this by claiming that politicians are naïve or cowardly in their handling of Islam-related issues. For a comment to be coded as targeting the political establishment, it was not enough to criticise a small number of parties;[91] it had to either target all established parties/politicians or support a radical party/politician that the commenter considered to be in a position outside the establishment. An example of the former was a sarcastic Swedish commenter who criticised politicians for not handling the spread of Islamism in Swedish suburbs: "Welcome to the new exciting Sweden!! Nice work politicians! You must be incredibly satisfied with the way things have become." An example of the latter type was a Danish commenter praising the efforts of the leader of the radical right populist party The New Right, Pernille Vermund, for her proposal to stop Muslims from applying for asylum in Denmark: "Where others are silent, Pernille dares to speak her mind (thumbs up)." Criticism of the EU establishment for e.g. facilitating Muslim immigration was also coded within this subcategory. In contrast to the Islam-sceptic comments within this subcategory, Islam-sympathetic comments typically criticised the political establishment for treating Muslims in a discriminating

[91] Except if an established party was accused of election fraud.

manner and/or creating unfounded fears around Muslims/immigration. As one Danish commenter wrote in response to a post showing a clip from a televised debate: “The politicians are smart… [When they are asked a question] they at once shift the focus to something that does not exist; ‘Swedish conditions’…”.

Another way that commenters deconstructed power relations was by criticising established news media for being biased and not reporting crucial facts about Islam (subcategory: *mainstream media*). For a comment to be coded within the subcategory, it was not enough to disagree with the news media on just one case; the criticism had to be more systematic. Moreover, it was not enough to criticise just one outlet, although exceptions were made if the commenter argued for boycotting the outlet or expressed systematic criticism of a state-financed public service broadcaster for how it reported on these issues. Otherwise, the comments coded within this subcategory criticised the mainstream media as a homogenous group, marked by bias and problematic reporting with respect to Islam. Both Islam/Muslim-sympathetic and Islam/Muslim-sceptic commenters were found within the subcategory. Typically, the former group targeted the media for causing prejudice against Islam and Muslims while the latter attacked the media for naïve reporting and for not showing Islam and Muslims’ “true” (violent, intolerant) character.

A third way in which commenters deconstructed power relations was by targeting the criminal justice system (subcategory: *criminal justice system*). While in theory this subcategory could be coded in relation to comments expressing a positive attitude towards Islam, no such comments were found. Rather, these comments typically criticised law enforcement and/or the judiciary system for being too lenient towards Muslims or radical Islamists, sometimes claiming that they give special treatment to Muslims or radical Islamists over non-Muslims and ethnic Scandinavians. As one Danish commenter put it, “There are no greater and more

fanatical racists than Muslims, but they are protected in every way and are not charged nor sentenced for their fanaticism. But that happens with us Danes if we as much as look at them...".

A fourth subcategory was used to account for comments that criticised other actors than the political establishment, mainstream media, and criminal justice system (subcategory: *other actors*). Comments placed within this subcategory featured criticism of powerful technology companies such as Facebook and Google for allegedly silencing oppositional points of view, as well as condemnation of the academic elite for being detached from reality. One example is a Norwegian commenter expressing frustration with Facebook for limiting their freedom of speech: "…I get NAUSEATED and feel CONTEMPT for everyone who are so cowardly…I would draw [the prophet] Muhammed every single day if I could, but the greatest problem is that one will just be deplatformed".

Furthermore, a fifth way counterpublic-minded commenters deconstructed power relations was by targeting political correctness or naivety, without specifying which actor(s) were at fault for these phenomena (subcategory: *unspecified actor*). These commenters often criticised their country (Norway/Sweden/Denmark) or Europe for its naïve or politically correct approach to Islam but did not specify whether this pertained to politicians, media outlets, the justice system, or others. As one Swedish commenter who criticised Sweden's approach to Islam wrote, "I have almost given up commenting due to Sweden's servility. It will require great change for Sweden to stand tall again". In contrast to anti-Islam/anti-Muslim commenters, pro-Islam/pro-Muslim commenters within this subcategory claimed that there is no room for positive attitudes towards Islam and/or Muslims in today's debate climate.

We have now considered the (sub)categories used to analyse the comments. Before summarising this chapter, intercoder reliability is reported for the comment variables.

Table 4.6: Kappa coefficients for variables related to the analysis of comments

Variable	Kappa
Sentiment	0.79
Popularity cues	Not calculated
Argumentative countering	0.81
…Islamic practice/trait	0.89
……Attitude towards Islamic practice/trait	0.84
…Championing other countries	0.76
…General evaluation of Islam/Muslims	0.61
…Conversion to Islam	0.9
…Political labelling	0.77
…Harassment of political opponents	0.95
…Handling of Islamists/jihadists	0.72
…General evaluation of religion	0.67
…Muslim immigration	0.88
Strengthening identity	0.7
…Emotional content	0.73
…Impolite tone	0.65
…Political identification	0.8
……Political party type	0.8
…Alarmism	0.75
Deconstruction of power relations	0.81
…Political establishment	0.71
…Mainstream media	0.89
…Criminal justice system	0.89
…Other actors	Not calculated
…Unspecified actors	0.71

As displayed in table 4.6, satisfactory intercoder agreement (0.60+) was reached for all variables. The lowest reliability score for a variable (0.61) was received by the general evaluation of Islam/Muslims subcategory. Although satisfactory agreement was reached also for this subcategory, it occasionally proved challenging to agree on what constituted a *general* evaluation of Islam and Muslims. Within the deconstruction of power relations category, criticism of *other actors* could not be calculated, as there were no such comments coded among the ones randomly selected for the reliability test.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has focused on describing data selection and the methodological approach of the study. The 5 most followed news outlets on Facebook from each of the three Scandinavian countries were selected, i.e. a total of 15 outlets. The selection includes public service broadcasters, hybrid broadcasters, tabloids, and broadsheets. A set of search words associated with Islam was used to identify relevant posts published in the last seven months of 2018. In addition to all the identified posts (N=602), around 10% of the original comments, i.e. comments replying directly to the posts (N=6797), were analysed using quantitative content analysis. Some of the variables examined in the analysis are considered in both the posts and the comments, but others are specific to each arena. Sentiment (towards Islam) and popularity cues are analysed in both posts and comments. Only posts (and their associated articles) are coded for their genre, theme, and source, while only comments are analysed for various characteristics related to counterpublic discursive patterns.

In the following three chapters, the results are presented and discussed, starting with the Facebook posts and their linked articles.

Chapter 5: Facebook Posts—Items Published by the Established News Media

The Facebook posts and their associated articles represent the most powerful subpublic analysed in this study. With the mainstream news media's mass audience and high consumption among the countries' elites, this subpublic may be considered as having considerable impact on the formation of political will (Toepfl & Piwoni, p. 470). In this chapter, the genres, themes, sources, and sentiment (towards Islam) that characterise this public in the three Scandinavian countries are compared.

We saw in Chapter 2 that longitudinal studies of media as well as political discourse on Islam (and immigration) have found that Islam has risen higher on the political agenda in recent decades, especially in Denmark (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Lövheim, Lindberg, et al., 2018; Lundby et al., 2018). The data used in this study does not allow for generalisation of the findings with respect to frequency, since it studies a limited time period. That said, here the Danish news media were also found to post the highest number of items about Islam.

Table 5.1: Number of Facebook posts about Islam by country, (number of unique posts)

	Norway	**Sweden**	**Denmark**	**Total**
Number of posts	140 (124)	224 (157)	238 (203)	602 (484)

Using the selected criteria outlined in Chapter 4, 602 posts were found, and there were 484 unique items. As seen in table 5.1, the Norwegian news media were found to publish clearly fewer posts about Islam than the Swedish and Danish outlets. The gap between Norway and Sweden was exacerbated by the Swedish outlets having a higher number of Facebook pages, which they often used to repost items. Duplicate items can, however, only to some degree account for the difference in the number of Facebook posts between the countries. The selected search criteria led to the identification of 140 Norwegian posts (out of which 124

were unique items), 224 Swedish posts (157 unique items), and 238 Danish posts (203 unique items).

Genres

Scholars have noted that journalism to an increasing degree is marked by debate and interpretation (e.g. Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). This has also been the case in Scandinavian coverage of Islam. Lundby et al. (2018) found that the proportion of debate items about Islam rose from only 2% in Norwegian and Swedish newspapers in 1988, to 12% and 27%, respectively, in 2008, while Denmark had an increase from 25% to 57% in the same period. Moreover, a shift from news to debate has been observed in Scandinavian newspaper coverage of immigration (Hovden & Mjelde 2019). It was therefore expected that debate items also would be highly prevalent in the items posted by the established news media on Facebook.

Table 5.2: Genres in the Facebook posts by country, percent (N=602)[92]

	Norway (140)	**Sweden (224)**	**Denmark (238)**	**Total (602)**
News	64 (89)	76 (170)	89 (213)	78 (472)
Debate	34 (47)	24 (54)	10 (24)	21 (125)
Comedy	3 (4)	0 (0)	0 (1)	1 (5)

As displayed by table 5.2, however, the clearly most common genre was news: 78% of the total number of posts and their associated articles were news items, 21% were debate items, and 1% were comedy items. A possible explanation for the dominance of news items found in this study is that the outlets use Facebook to keep people returning for the latest headlines and news, while they “save” the debate genre for the print edition to increase its value in a time when reading of print news is declining. Also, it should be noted that the studied media are in fact *news* media. Moreover, although seemingly low compared to studies on related topics (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Lundby et al., 2018), the fact that one fifth of items

[92] Due to rounding of percentages, the sum of the individual numbers does not always add up to 100%.

were debate items is relatively high compared with what is the case in news media generally (see e.g. Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019; Nossen, 2010).

At the same time, there were differences between the countries. Table 5.2 shows that the Swedish, and, particularly, the Norwegian media, tended to post debate items on their Facebook pages more frequently than the Danish ones. Whereas one third (34%) and one quarter (24%) of posts were debate items on the Norwegian and Swedish pages, respectively, only one in ten Danish posts were debate items. This finding is somewhat surprising given that it does not reflect the general newspaper coverage of Islam in Denmark, which Lundby et al.'s (2018) study indicate to a larger degree than the other Scandinavian countries has been increasingly marked by debate items. That said, Lundby et al. (2018) looked at print versions, which may contain more debate content than the online version of the same newspaper. Investigating whether these national differences pertain to Islam specifically or whether Danish news media generally post fewer debate items on their Facebook pages is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

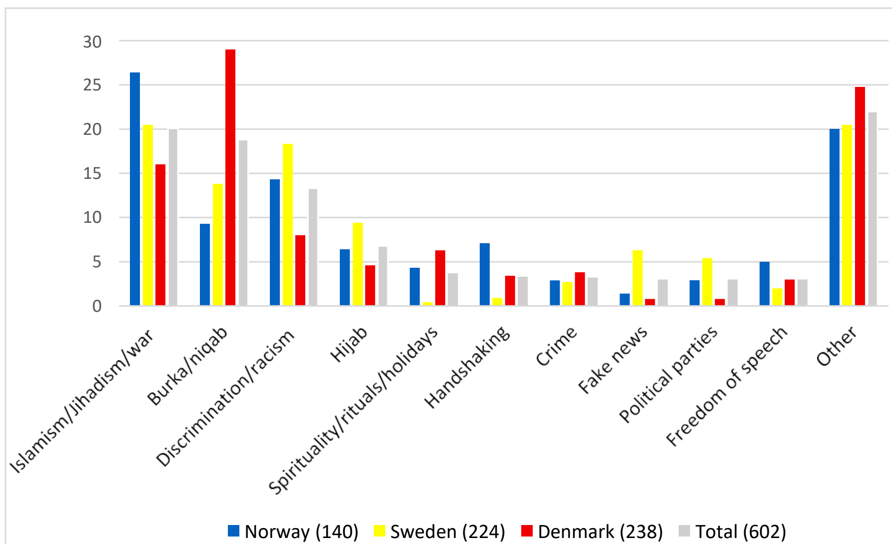
Regardless, it is worth mentioning that this does not suggest that the Danish media to a lesser degree facilitated the involvement of Facebook users in the discussions. As will be presented in more detail in Chapter 7, posting a debate item did not result in higher engagement from the audience. Furthermore, the Danish media, in line with social media logic (Haim et al., 2019), more frequently than the Norwegian and Swedish media added a question directed at its Facebook followers along with the posts, which boosted user engagement (see more in Chapter 7).

Themes

A common finding in the existing literature on media representation of Islam and Muslims is that it tends to focus on negatively loaded themes (see e.g. Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). This finding, at least to some extent, seems to be true for the Scandinavian news media's Facebook posts. In total, 29 different themes were

coded in the posts and associated articles. The 10 most prevalent ones are shown in the following figure. If one adds the presence of Islamism/Jihadism/war, crime, and honour culture, these were the main theme in one fourth of the studied Facebook posts. Out of these, however, only Islamism/Jihadism/war was a particularly salient theme. Crime was the seventh most common theme, while honour culture was not among the 10 most common ones. It was thus placed in the "other" category in the following figure.

Figure 5.1: Prevalence of the 10 most common themes, percent (N=602)



As illustrated by figure 5.1, there were three themes that stood out: (1) Islamism, Jihadism, and war; (2) the burka and niqab; and (3) discrimination and racism. These were the main themes in 20%, 19%, and 13% of posts, respectively. Then followed the hijab (7%) as the fourth most common main theme. Although there were national variations, the remaining themes were the main subject in less than 4% of the total number of posts and consisted of such issues as spirituality/rituals/holidays, handshaking, crime, and fake news.

The most prevalent theme category, Islamism/Jihadism/war, was most frequently the main category in the Norwegian posts (26%) and least often the focus of the

Danish posts (16%). This finding contradicts longitudinal research on Scandinavian media coverage, which shows that the (terrorist) threat associated with immigration has been substantially more explicit in the Danish newspapers than in the other Scandinavian countries (Hovden et al., 2019). At the same time, it is worth noting that even though the Islamism, Jihadism, and war category was highly prevalent in the material, these posts did not typically blame Islam or Muslims in general for these issues. Rather, the posts were focused on (members of) ISIS, human rights violations in countries marked by sharia law such as Iran and Pakistan, and revelations about (radical) Islamists in various (more or less) powerful positions in Scandinavian societies, such as politicians, imams, and school leaders. Court cases in Norway in 2018 against infamous radical Islamists Mullah Krekar and Mohyeldeen Mohammad contributed to making the category particularly prominent on the Norwegian Facebook pages.

The burka/niqab was the second most salient theme in the posts. The high media focus on this relatively marginal phenomenon in the Scandinavian countries, i.e. women wearing face veils, can be explained by Denmark passing a law banning the use of face-covering clothing in public space during the studied period. Norway also implemented a ban against face-covering clothing in August 2018, but this only pertained to teaching situations and did not nearly cause the same controversy. The Danish ban gained a lot of attention on the studied Facebook pages as well as in the public sphere at large. It also got extensive international attention.[93] Even though only between 100 and 200 people have been found to be wearing the niqab in Denmark (Warburg, Johansen, & Østergaard, 2013, p. 33), 29% of the Danish posts had face veils as a main theme. The Swedish outlets posted extensively on its neighbour countries' bans, and face-covering clothing was the main theme of 14%

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[93] See for instance
https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/denmark-burqa-veil-ban/566630/;
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45064237;
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/europe/denmark-ban-muslim-veil.html

Swedish posts, which was higher than the 9% of Norwegian posts that focused on face veils.

Similarly to Hovden and Mjelde's (2019) findings from their longitudinal study of discourse on immigration in Scandinavian newspapers, discrimination and racism was more common in the Swedish media's Facebook posts (18%) than in the Norwegian (14%) and Danish (8%) posts. This suggests that, even though Swedish discourse in relation to Islam and immigration has changed since the refugee crisis, discrimination and racism remains a central focus of the debate. These posts typically featured Muslim sources sharing experiences of racism and discrimination. In addition, several Swedish news stories featured revelations about politicians (typically Sweden Democrats) who had made hateful and derogatory remarks against Muslims, often in online settings.

As displayed in figure 5.1, the hijab was the fourth most common main theme,[94] being the main focus in 7% of posts. Particularly an article by the Swedish newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* revealing that 27 out of 40 Swedish preschools were willing to control and force children to wear the headscarf served as a catalyst for Swedish posts about the subject.[95] This story was covered on several of the selected news media's Facebook pages and contributed to the hijab being a salient theme in particularly the Swedish posts (9%). All the politicians and journalists expressing their opinions on the case condemned the practice of forcing children to wear the headscarf. Overall, then, there was a considerable focus on Islamic clothing in the posts, considering also the massive focus on face veils.

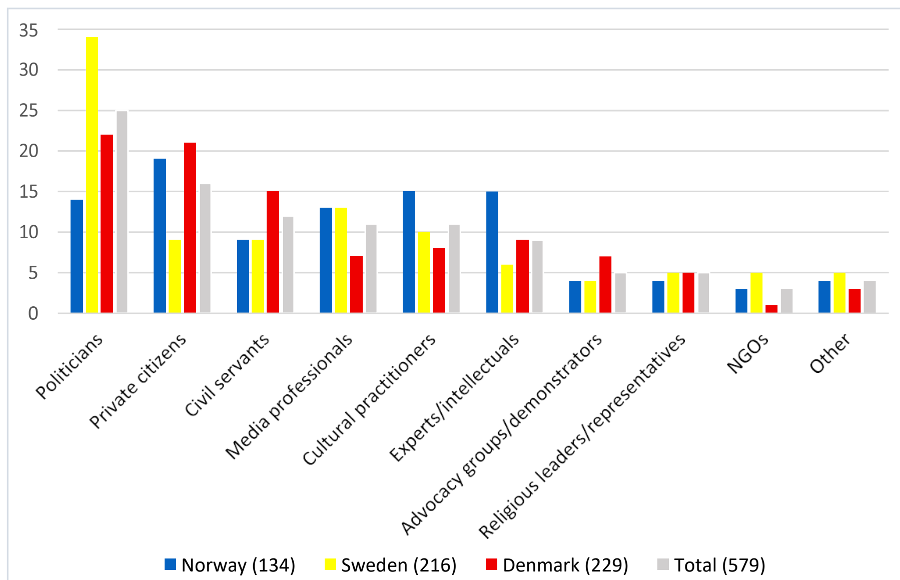
Sources

The main source, typically the first source of a post, was coded for each post. In debate items, the author (of written items) and speaker (in video posts) were coded

[94] This also included other Islamic clothing that does not cover the face, notably the abaya.
[95] https://www.gp.se/nyheter/gp-granskar/27-av-40-f%C3%B6rskolor-s%C3%A4ger-ja-till-sl%C3%B6jtv%C3%A5ng-1.6326768?

as the main source. 579 of the 602 posts and associated article texts had a source, and the results presented in this subsection are based on these items. In terms of the position/role of the source, the following values were coded: politicians, private citizens, civil servants, media professionals, cultural practitioners, experts/intellectuals, advocacy groups/demonstrators, religious leaders/representatives, NGOs, and "other". Elite sources were highly prevalent in the material, and the findings in this respect mostly echoed existing literature, which has found evidence for elite-dominated representation (Berkowitz, 2009; Don & Lee, 2014; Manning 2001).

Figure 5.2: Prevalence of sources, percent (n=579)



As shown in figure 5.2, politicians were the most represented source category in the material, appearing as the main source in one fourth of the total number of posts. Furthermore, other elite sources, such as civil servants, media professionals, and experts/intellectuals were widely represented. At the same time, private citizens (sources who represent their own views and do not speak on behalf of an institution), a group constituted almost exclusively by "ordinary people", were the

second most represented of all the source categories. Ordinary people were occasionally also found in the advocacy groups/demonstrators category and, in some instances, also in the cultural practitioners category. Overall, then, elite voices dominated, but ordinary people's perspectives were far from absent in the material.

There were, however, differences between the countries. The main difference was that politicians were particularly prominent in the Swedish posts, being the main source in one third (34%) of Swedish items, compared to one fifth (22%) of Danish items and one seventh of Norwegian items (14%). In contrast, private citizens were relatively infrequently the main sources in Swedish posts (9%) compared to Danish (21%) and Norwegian (19%) post. There is, however, reason to believe that the Swedish September elections influenced these numbers substantially. After all, longitudinal studies of both media and political discourse have shown that Islam is higher on the agenda in Denmark than in Norway and Sweden (Lundby et al., 2018; Lövheim, Lindberg, et al., 2018). At the same time, the high prevalence of Swedish politician sources in posts about Islam may reflect the increased salience of the socio-cultural dimension in Swedish politics in recent years (Strömbäck et al., 2017).

Given the prevalence of politician sources in the material, it is worth considering which type of politicians were represented. The results displayed the same pattern as identified by Hovden and Mjelde (2019, pp. 150–151), who found that social democratic parties have been the most common source among the party families in Scandinavian articles about immigration since the 1970s, but that the radical right populist party family has become the most used source in recent years.

Table 5.3: Top three most represented party families in each country, the number of posts with national politician sources (n=119)[96]

Norway (17)	**Sweden (61)**	**Denmark (41)**
Right-wing populist (8)	Social democrat (21)	Right-wing populist (21)
Liberal (4)	Right-wing populist (13)	Conservative-liberal/agrarian[97] (9)
Social democrat (3)	Christian democrat (10)	Social democrat (4)
Other (2)	Other (17)	Other (7)

As shown in table 5.3, right-wing populist parties[98] were the most commonly represented party-family in Norwegian and Danish Facebook posts, being the main source in around half of the posts, whereas in the Swedish posts the Social Democrats were the most represented party, being the main source in approximately one third of items. The right-wing populist Sweden Democrats was not represented to the same extent as its Scandinavian counterparts but was still the second most represented Swedish party.

Until now, we have focused on the positions/roles of sources. We will now consider to what extent Muslims were represented as sources in the posts. For reference, previous studies have typically found that (ethnic and religious) minorities are systematically underrepresented as sources in media coverage (e.g. Hognestad & Lamark, 2017; Madsen, 2005; Rodriguez, 2018; Strand et al., 2018), i.e. that they are talked about rather than talked with (Jacobsen et al., 2013, p. 13). Researchers have, however, also found that minority voices have been heard to a substantial extent (Figenschou, & Beyer, 2014a; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Strand et al., 2016). As

[96] Only Scandinavian politician sources are considered here. Thus, the numbers do not align with those in figure 5.2, where non-Scandinavian politicians were also included.
[97] *Venstre*
[98] The New Right was included when coding these parties in addition to the Danish People's Party, the Progress party, and the Sweden Democrats. The New Right had no parliamentary representation in the studied period but polled 2.4% in the 2019 elections and received 4 out of 179 seats in *Folketinget*.

indicated in the table below, the findings in this study were more in line with the latter group of studies.

Table 5.4: Muslim and non-Muslim sources, percent of posts with at least one source (n=579)

Sources	**Norway (134)**	**Sweden (216)**	**Denmark (229)**	**Total (579)**
Muslims	34 (46)	23 (49)	26 (59)	27 (154)
Non-Muslims	57 (77)	64 (139)	67 (154)	64 (370)
Unclear	8 (11)	13 (28)	7 (16)	9 (55)

27% of the total number of posts with at least one source had Muslims as a main source. Muslims were the main source in 34% of Norwegian items, 26% of Danish items, and 23% of Swedish items. These numbers are high if you compare them to the proportion of the Scandinavian population that are Muslims.[99] At the same time, it seems intuitive that news outlets want to hear the perspectives of those who adhere to Islam when covering the religion, although research suggests that this is not always the case (e.g. Jacobsen et al., 2013).

While this is not shown in the table, Muslims primarily appeared in the posts and associated articles as private citizens but also commonly as cultural practitioners and religious leaders/representatives. Although there are exceptions, they relatively rarely appeared in elite roles, such as politicians, civil servants, and media professionals. The number of minorities in these positions are low in the Scandinavian societies as a whole. Thus, the relatively low presence of Muslims sources from these categories reflect that these positions generally are dominated by the majority populations (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014a, p. 39).

It is worth noting that some research that has investigated the representation of Muslims in Western media have found that there seems to be a tendency to select

[99] Pew Research Center (2017) estimated that 5.4% of the Danish, 5.7% of the Norwegian, and 8.1% of the Swedish population were Muslims in 2016. https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/

the Muslim actors who are most vocal and visible, who differ more from the majority population than other Muslims, such as extremists, Salafists, imams, and representatives of Islamic organisations (Jacobsen et al., 2013, p. 13). At the same time, less vocal Muslims who practice their religion outside the religious institutions and who do not attract attention have been considered overlooked (Hervik, 2002; Hussain, 2000; Jacobsen et al., 2013). As previously noted, Muslims were found to often appear as religious representatives also in this study, and we saw in the sections on themes that Islamism/Jihadism/war and face veils were the two most common subjects in the news outlets' posts. This is perhaps an indication that the Facebook posts emphasised perspectives that are relatively marginal among Scandinavian Muslims.

To examine this notion, Muslim sources were coded into four categories. These categories in no way captured the complex views among adherents of Islam but were used to give a rough impression of the Muslim perspectives that the Scandinavian news media represented through their Facebook pages. The categories used were as follows: (1) liberal views, defined here as opposition to conservative or fundamentalist interpretations of Islam; (2) (radical) Islamist views, a category represented Islamists and (previous) supporters of ISIS; (3) conservative views, defined here as advocating marginal versions of Islam which may cause significant tension with the majority population (e.g. wear a niqab or refuse to shake hands with the opposite sex) but which are not described as Islamist in the post; and (4) undefined, Muslim perspectives that could not be placed into any of the previous categories.

The undefined category was by far the most coded (81 of the total 154 posts with a Muslim as a main source), as there was often insufficient information to place someone within the other three categories. Then followed liberal Muslims as the second most represented category (28 posts), (radical) Islamists as the third (26

posts), and conservative Muslims as the least represented category (19 posts). Excluding the undefined category, liberal Muslims were the most represented category in the Norwegian posts, whereas (radical) Islamist and conservative Muslims were represented the most in the Swedish and Danish posts. Thus, the results indicate that the Swedish and Danish news media's Facebook posts to the largest extent let conservative Muslims and (radical) Islamists contribute to defining Islam, while the Norwegian media highlighted liberal Muslims' voices. The relatively high presence of (radical) Islamists and conservative Muslims sources point to that the news outlet's posts (in the Swedish and Danish cases) did indeed focus on Muslims that are more different from the majority population than other Muslims. Overall, (radical) Islamists were the main source in one sixth of Facebook posts that had Muslims as a main source. At the same time, it is worth stressing that (radical) Islamists were not represented through debate items; these deviant actors were not invited to give their opinion without being exposed and contextualised. This was also largely the case with conservative Muslims. Only one debate item (a video post from a radio debate with a Danish niqabi—where the hosts asked about, and subsequently strongly criticised, the niqabi's views on homosexuality)—featured a conservative Muslim as the main source of a debate item.[100] For reference, one third (9 out of 28) of the posts in which a liberal Muslim was a main source were debate items, suggesting that liberal Muslims were able to formulate their stances more unfiltered than what was the case with radical and conservative Muslims.

Sentiment Towards Islam

To analyse how the Scandinavian news outlets covered Islam in this study, the Facebook posts (and their associated article text) were coded as either negative, negatively loaded, positive, or neutral towards Islam. The negatively loaded category accounted for posts that were not negative towards Islam per se but that

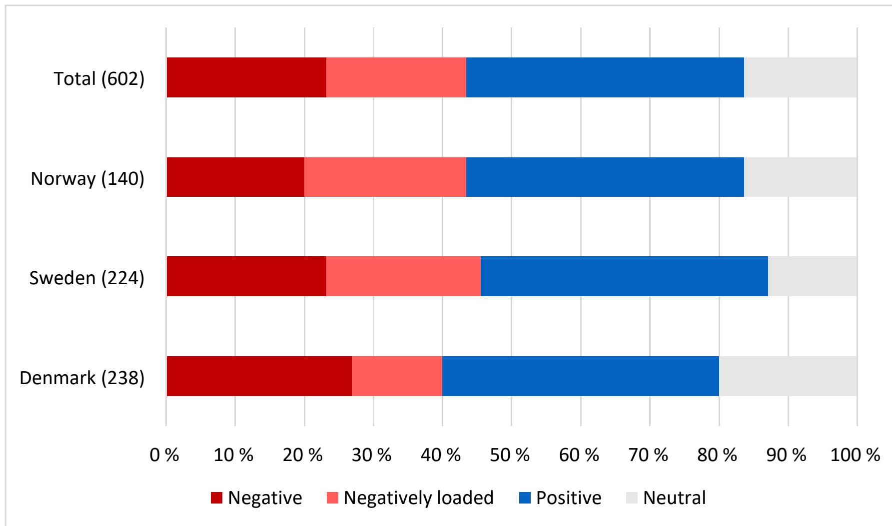
[100] https://www.dr.dk/radio/p1/shitstorm/shitstorm-44

discussed negatively charged themes, such as Islamism/Jihadism/war, honour culture, and crime (without linking these themes to Islam or Muslims in general).

For reference, the voluminous academic literature that has studied how Islam and Muslims have been covered in the media has generally found that the coverage is overwhelmingly negative and serves to (re)produce stereotypes (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Axner, 2015; Baker et al., 2013; Hussain 2000; Said, 1997), although studies have also found tendencies of more complex and positive media representations (Bleich et al., 2015; Carol & Koopmans, 2013; Vanparys et al., 2013). When it comes to differences between Scandinavian media discourses on Islam-related issues, we saw in Chapter 2 that these range from the largely negative Danish discourse to the more amicable Swedish discourse, with Norway in a position between the two (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). This also reflects how political and public discourse in the three countries have dealt with these topics (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Brochmann, 2018). At the same time, the sphere of consensus in Swedish debate regarding these issues has contracted substantially following the 2015 refugee crisis, and critical views of immigration and Islam that before were considered deviant have become legitimate. Several studies have also found that Swedish media coverage of Islam is negative (e.g. Axner, 2015; Hvitfelt, 1998). Based on these considerations, it was hypothesised that:

H1: Danish posts (and their associated article texts) will cover Islam more negatively than Norwegian and Swedish posts (and their associated article texts) will. The Norwegian items will be more negative than the Swedish items, albeit the difference will be marginal.

Figure 5.3: Sentiment towards Islam by country, (N=602)



As illustrated in figure 5.3, the findings showed that there among the total number of posts were almost twice as many positive (41%) as negative items (24%). As such, the established news media's Facebook posts were largely positive towards Islam and Muslims, if one compares outright positive with outright negative items. If one adds the number of negative posts with the 20% of negatively loaded posts, however, the number of positive and negative posts were quite even. Depending on how one chooses to interpret these numbers, then, the established news media's Facebook posts were either largely positive or mixed in how they represented Islam and Muslims. Either way, the findings were clearly more in line with studies that have found more complex and positive media representations of Islam and Muslims than studies that have found overtly negative depictions.

Addressing hypothesis 1, the Danish news media published the largest proportion of posts that were explicitly negative towards Islam (27% of the Danish posts), which was in line with expectations based on previous research. Nonetheless, it was surprising that not more than 27% of the items were negative. Comparing the number of negative and positive posts in the three countries, the Danish news

outlets posted around 0.7 negative item for every positive item, while the Norwegian and Swedish news outlets posted around 0.5 negative item for every positive item. In other words, all the three countries' media covered Islam mainly in a positive way. Although the generalisability of these findings is limited by the fact that this is a study of a seven-month period, on one platform, the fact that Sweden was similar to Norway may be considered a testament to how much Swedish discourse on Islam and related topics has changed since the 2015 refugee crisis.

If one adds the negatively loaded category with the negative category, the difference between the three countries is marginal. In fact, this would make the Danish posts the most positive and the Swedish items the least positive. Still, it is only the negative category where clear negativity of Islam or Muslims is expressed. As such, it can be argued that the fact that the Danish posts featured more of these than the Norwegian and Swedish posts *does* suggest that the Danish coverage was more negative. This is even though there were few debate items among the Danish posts, and that debate items tended to be more negative than news items.[101] A qualitative assessment of the negative posts seems to confirm this notion; the negative Danish posts are harsher, more sensationalist, and more generalising towards Muslims and Islam than the negative Swedish and Norwegian posts are.[102]

Still, support for hypothesis 1 was rather limited. While the Danish posts and associated articles most often were negative towards Islam, this finding can be nuanced by the fact that Danish posts relatively infrequently were marked by items

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[101] The debate items featured 30% positive and 38% negative posts, while the news items featured 22% positive and 41% negative posts.

[102] It is worth remarking that this was mainly the case for the Danish tabloids. See for instance https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/danskpolitik/vermund-retter-partifaelle-stop-statsborgerskab-til-alle-mennesker-fra-muslimske-lande/7279012 https://www.bt.dk/samfund/dansk-folkeparti-langer-ud-efter-julearrangement-paa-noerrebro-det-provokerer-mig?fbclid=IwAR1ahNIgVLvpxxKNzXi6fwtMiQNgAlKkDPcpfEOT_Ssflj8f4sYdE4jBPaE https://ekstrabladet.dk/nationen/saa-maa-du-forlade-landet-lille-ven-ikke-meget-stoette-til-ayesha-med-niqab/7180894

that were not negative towards Islam per se, but that dealt with negatively laden themes. Furthermore, Swedish posts proved to be comparatively less positive than expected, being very similar to Norwegian posts in terms of sentiment towards Islam.

As such, while the socio-political contexts laid out in Chapter 2 pointed to three countries with substantially different debates around Islam and immigration, the differences between the countries in the immediate context of the commenters, i.e. the news media's Facebook posts, was quite marginal. Another notable finding was that positive posts dominated. From the corrective action perspective, this may prompt Islam-critical commenters in all countries to write comments and to like and share content they endorse and deem relevant. This was already expected to be the case to a high degree in Sweden, and to some extent in Norway, but these results also suggest that Islam-critical Danes may feel there is plenty to "correct" about the Danish media coverage.

At the same time, it should not be underestimated that the commenters operate within a larger context that is not restricted to the posts. As was described in the introduction to this dissertation, online communication is here not understood as something "out there" i.e. detached from reality, but considered to be operating within the socio-political and historical context of the overarching public sphere of a polity. In other words, the comment sections are expected to be influenced by discussions that go on more broadly in the public sphere—in addition to the immediate context (as well as the affordances provided by the platform). This is further addressed in Chapter 6, when the results from the analysis of the comment sections are presented. First, though, we will consider how the various news media types covered Islam in their posts and linked articles.

Comparing News Media Types

As we saw in Chapter 4, four different news media types were included in the study: (1) traditional state-funded public service broadcasters (PSBs); (2) tabloids; (3) broadsheets; and (4) hybrid broadcasters (HSBs), which are financed by advertising and/or subscriptions whilst also retaining certain public service responsibilities (Lund & Berg, 2009). Tabloids are generally characterised by their more sensationalist, emotional coverage, which has been noted to impact their portrayal of Islam and Muslims. For instance, Baker (2010), who compared British tabloid and broadsheet coverage of Islam from 1999–2005, found that tabloids tended to link Muslims to terrorism and extremism and focus on a small number of high-profile Muslim “villains”. It should be noted, though, that there are clear differences between the British tabloids and the Norwegian and Swedish ones, which have a tradition for “quality” reporting in areas such as political and cultural journalism. Denmark’s leading tabloids *B.T.* and *Ekstra Bladet* are, however, more like the German tabloid *Bild* and British *The Sun* (Hovden et al., 2018, p. 331). Hybrid broadcasters’ communication has also been characterised by scholars as having populist tendencies, both in the form of anti-elitism and through the exclusion of out-groups (e.g. immigrants, Muslims) (Strabac, Thorbjørnsrud, & Jenssen, 2012). It could thus be assumed that the tabloids and the HSBs would focus more on negatively loaded themes in their posts than the state-financed broadcasters and broadsheets would.

Table 5.5: Prevalence of themes—comparison of public service broadcasters (PSBs), tabloids, broadsheets, and hybrid broadcasters (HSBs), percent (N=602)

Theme	**PBSs (151)**	**Tabloids (301)**	**Broadsheets (70)**	**HSBs (80)**
Burka/niqab	19 (28)	17 (50)	19 (13)	28 (22)
Islamism/Jihadism/war	**22 (33)**	**16 (48)**	**24 (17)**	**29 (23)**
Discrimination/racism	9 (14)	16 (49)	17 (12)	6 (5)
Hijab	9 (14)	8 (25)	3 (2)	0
Spirituality/rituals/holidays	5 (8)	3 (10)	0	5 (4)
Handshaking	3 (5)	3 (8)	6 (4)	4 (3)
Crime	**3 (5)**	**4 (11)**	**1 (1)**	**3 (2)**
Fake news	4 (6)	4 (11)	0	1 (1)
Political parties	1 (1)	5 (15)	1 (1)	1 (1)
Freedom of speech	3 (5)	2 (6)	6 (4)	3 (2)
Honour culture	**1 (2)**	**4 (12)**	**0**	**3 (2)**
Other	20 (30)	19 (56)	23 (16)	19 (15)

Unexpectedly, as depicted in table 5.5, the tabloids had the lowest focus on Islamism/Jihadism/war (16%). They focused more on crime and honour culture than the PSBs and broadsheets did, but these were relatively infrequent themes compared to the Islamism/Jihadism/war category. The HSBs' focus, however, was more in line with expectations, as Islamism/Jihadism/war was the main theme in as many as 29% of their posts.

In terms of sentiment, the tabloids stood out with the least positive coverage of Islam, particularly compared to the PSBs and broadsheets.

Table 5.6: Sentiment towards Islam—comparison of public service broadcasters (PSBs), tabloids, broadsheets, and hybrid broadcasters (HSBs), percent (N=602)

Sentiment	**PSBs (151)**	**Tabloids (301)**	**Broadsheets (70)**	**HSBs (80)**
Negative	15 (22)	30 (90)	17 (12)	23 (18)
Positive	47 (71)	37 (112)	47 (33)	35 (28)
Neutral	17 (26)	17 (50)	16 (11)	14 (11)
Negatively loaded	21 (32)	16 (49)	20 (14)	29 (23)

As shown in table 5.6, while only 15% of PSBs' posts and 17% of broadsheets' posts were negative to Islam, the corresponding figure for tabloids was 30%. It should be noted, however, that the tabloids were also more often positive than negative. While this is not shown in the table, there was a difference between the Danish tabloids, on the one hand, and the Swedish and Norwegian tabloids, on the other. While the Danish tabloids' posts and associated articles covered Islam mostly negatively (1.6 negative posts per positive post), the Swedish (0.6 negative post per positive post) and Norwegian tabloids (0.8 negative post per positive post) tended to portray Islam positively.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that the Scandinavian news media mainly covered Islam positively in their Facebook posts and associated articles in the studied period. This was especially the case with the Norwegian and Swedish media, which published twice as many positive as negative items. The Danish news media were the least positive but also posted more positive than negative items. The relatively marginal differences between the countries in this regard was surprising considering the socio-political and historical differences outlined in Chapter 2. Thus, the findings gave quite limited support for hypothesis 1 of the dissertation (i.e. that Danish posts and their associated article texts will cover Islam more negatively than Norwegian and Swedish posts and their associated article texts will. The Norwegian items will be more negative than the Swedish items, albeit the difference will be marginal).

The posts mainly concentrated on three themes: (1) Islamism, Jihadism, and war; (2) face veils (i.e. the burka and niqab); and (3) discrimination and racism. The substantial focus on the burka and niqab was driven primarily by the Danish ban of face-covering clothing that occurred during the studied period, which led to 29% of the Danish posts discussing this topic. Much in line with the descriptions in Chapter 2, Sweden's considerable focus on discrimination and racism also stood out.

We will in in the following chapter shift focus from the news outlets’ Facebook posts and associated articles to the ordinary citizens’ replies to these items.

Chapter 6: Facebook Comments—Items Written by Ordinary Citizens

This chapter analyses the comment sections beneath the established news media's Facebook posts about Islam, in light of the wider sociopolitical context and findings from the analysis of the posts. The chapter is split into two parts. The first part focuses on the general sentiment that Scandinavian commenters expressed towards Islam, i.e. the percent of negative, positive, neutral, and anti-Islamist[103] comments. It also considers how comment sentiment was related to the theme, source, and sentiment of the post to which the comments replied. Variations and similarities between how different news media types' comment sections depict Islam are also briefly considered. In the second part, the chapter presents and discusses results from the categories of counterpublic discourses: deconstructing power relations, argumentative countering, and strengthening identity. Based on the findings from the three categories, an overall assessment is made that compares how prevalent (both Islam-sceptic and Islam-sympathetic) counterpublic discourses are in the three countries' comment sections.

Sentiment

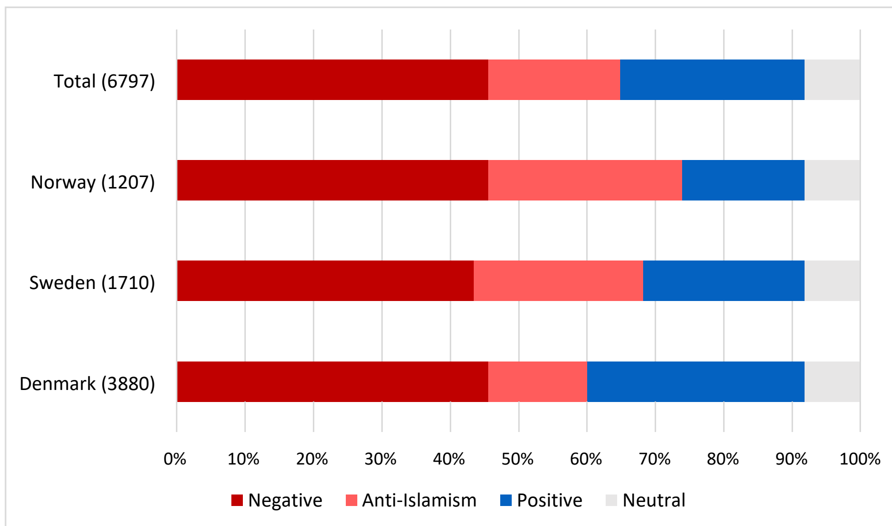
In line with the corrective action perspective, which predicts that citizens will attempt to "correct" perceived "wrongs" in the public sphere by taking online or offline action, it is assumed that the comments will show an almost diametrically opposed result from discourse on Islam in the public sphere at large. However, since Scandinavian research has shown that those who comment on news media's comment sections are more negative to immigration than the average population (Enjolras et al., 2013), and that studies of social media discourse on Islam and

[103] This sentiment category was called anti-Islamist for brevity but also included opposition to Jihadism, war, honour culture, and crime.

Muslims have found mainly negative depictions (Awan, 2016, McEnery et al., 2015; Oboler, 2016, Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016), it was predicted that:

H2: All countries' comment sections will have more negative than positive comments about Islam. In line with the corrective action perspective, the Swedish comment sections will have the highest number of negative comments compared to positive comments, the Danish comment sections will have the lowest number of negative compared to positive comments, and the Norwegian comment sections will be found between the Swedish and Danish ones.

Figure 6.1: Commenters' attitude towards Islam, (N=6797)



As displayed in figure 6.1, 45% of the total amount of comments were negative towards Islam or Muslims, 19% were anti-Islamist (but not negative towards Islam or Muslims in general), 27% of comments were positive towards Islam or Muslims, and 8% were neutral. As such, the results showed that the sentiment expressed in the comment sections varied fundamentally from the mainly positive posts published by the news outlets. The overall results were to some extent consistent for all the three countries: 45% of the Norwegian comments, 43% of the Swedish comments, and

47% of the Danish were negative, and all the countries had significantly fewer positive than negative comments. Thus, the first part of hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

The two most substantial differences between the countries were found in relation to the frequency of anti-Islamist and positive comments. Addressing the difference related to anti-Islamist comments first, these constituted a higher proportion of comments in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark (29% of Norwegian comments, 25% of Swedish comments, and 14% of Danish comment). This difference can, however, be explained by the fact that Danish commenters had a lower proportion of posts dealing with negatively loaded themes to which they could reply than Norwegian and Swedish commenters did (see figure 5.1).

More interestingly, the percent of positive comments was clearly higher in the Danish comment sections (32%) than in the Swedish comment sections (23%), and, particularly, the Norwegian comment sections (18%). As such, the pattern in the comments was different from the established news media's posts and the context outlined in Chapter 2. For every positive comment in the respective countries' comment sections, there were 2.5 negative Norwegian comments, 1.9 negative Swedish comments, and 1.5 negative Danish comments. In contrast, the previous chapter showed that for every positive post published by the mass media outlets from the three countries—there were 0.5 negative Norwegian posts, 0.5 negative Swedish posts, and 0.7 negative Danish posts. The corrective action perspective, which predicts that perceived "wrongs" in the public sphere will prompt individuals to "correct" these through both offline and online practices, was, however, not fully consistent with these findings. While the Danish comment sections were as predicted marked by negative attitudes towards Islam to the lowest degree, the Norwegian comments were, against expectations, substantially more negative than the Swedish ones. As such, the second part of hypothesis 2 was not confirmed.

From a corrective action point of view, one may have expected the Swedish comments to be more negative than the Norwegian ones, given the milder and more amicable Swedish debate climate around Islam, immigration, and integration. It is nevertheless clear that the spheres of opinion (Hallin, 1986) have been redefined in Sweden since the 2015 refugee crisis, perhaps leading to that individuals critical of how the Swedish public sphere has dealt with Islam feel they have less to correct in the current debate climate. Furthermore, because the immediate mass media context of the Norwegian commenters was equally positive to Islam as the immediate mass media context of the Swedish commenters was, Norwegian Facebook users critical towards Islam may also have been highly incentivised to take corrective action.

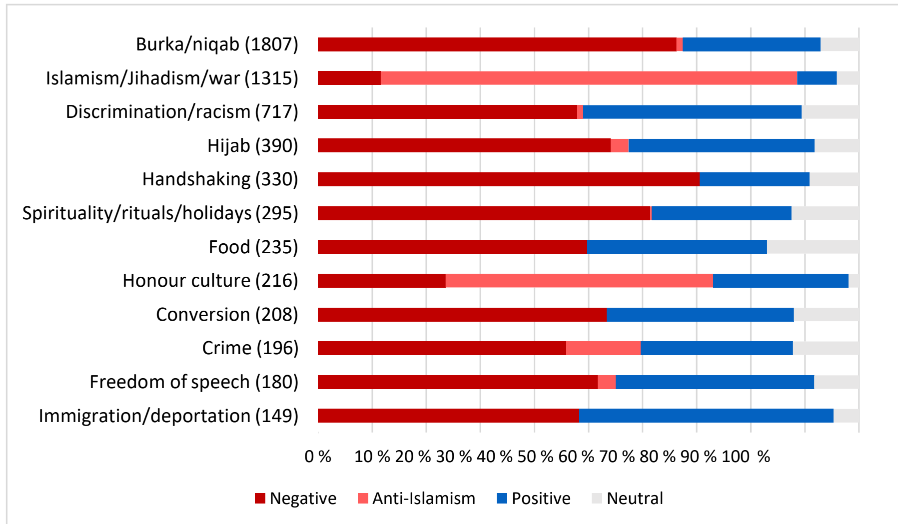
As we shall see in the following subsection, there were, however, substantial differences in commenters' attitudes depending on the theme that was discussed.

Themes

In the previous chapter we saw that the most prominent themes in the posts published by the established news media were Islamism, Jihadism, and war; the burka and niqab; discrimination and racism; the hijab; and spirituality, rituals, and holidays (see figure 5.1). But what sentiment did the commenters express towards posts focusing on the various themes, and did this vary between the countries? This subsection focuses on the themes that received at least 2% of the total number of analysed comments (N=6797), i.e. at least 136 comments. 12 themes met this criterion. Most of these themes were also among the most prevalent themes in the established news media's posts, but the themes food, honour culture, conversion, and immigration/deportation were added to the list, suggesting that commenters were more interested in these topics than the editorial news media were. Posts about political parties and fake news, however, were seemingly of less interest among the commenters; while these were among the top 10 themes that the news

outlets focused on, posts about these themes received less than 2% of the comments and are therefore not shown in the following figure.

Figure 6.2: Commenters' attitude towards Islam when responding to the most commented themes (N=6797)



A central finding was that none of the 12 most commented themes received more positive than negative comments. This included posts about discrimination and racism, which were framed overwhelmingly sympathetically towards Muslims by the news media but were not met with the same support by the commenters. As illustrated by the length of the red bars in figure 6.2, the themes that commenters were the most negative towards were not surprisingly relatively marginal practices among Muslims in Scandinavia, like refusing to shake hands with the opposite sex (71% negative comments) and wearing the burqa or niqab (66% negative comments). For instance, strong opposition was expressed when a Swedish court ruled that a Muslim woman was to be economically compensated by the firm that had turned her away from a job interview because she did not want to shake the

interviewers' hand.[104] Posts with spirituality/rituals/holidays as a main theme also received a high number of negative comments (61%). This category included replies to posts about circumcision and Muslim prison inmates requesting to be given special treatment to carry out fasting. These cases were given an overwhelmingly negative response, which contributed to the high percentage of negative comments in relation to this theme. Other posts related to spirituality, e.g. a *DR* post about a Danish imam explaining the need for more hospital imams, were met more positively.

As illustrated by the length of the blue bars in figure 6.2, the posts that were met by the highest percentage of positive comments in relation to Islam focused on immigration and deportation (47% positive comments), discrimination and racism (40% positive comments), and freedom of speech (37% positive comments). The fact that posts about immigration and deportation were met by a relatively high number of positive comments was somewhat surprising but can likely be explained by the nature of these posts. Of the few posts that had immigration/deportation as a main theme, a majority described (members of) Norwegian and Danish radical right populist parties advocating for a complete stop in Muslim immigration.[105] The radical character of this message split the commenters into two equally big camps: one consisting of those completely disagreeing and another consisting of those agreeing whole-heartedly. It is plausible that more moderate calls for restrictions to immigration would have been met by wider support.

[104] https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/uppsala/kvinna-vagrade-ta-i-hand-vid-intervju-unik-dom-ger-henne-ratt

[105] See for instance https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/XwQ9px/folkevandringen-fra-muslimske-land-boer-opphoere-per-willy-amundsen https://www.bt.dk/debat/det-kan-ganske-enkelt-ikke-lade-sig-goere?fbclid=IwAR0MwZ7xy2BubfBwaB2TUMeTGJcLw0SogA2tfuxcV_jWzWcA3-OMe9gFycE

Not surprisingly, the anti-Islamism/anti-Jihadism/anti-war/anti-honour culture/anti-crime category (referred to as anti-Islamism for brevity) was most often coded in relation with comments replying to posts about these themes. The established news media's posts about Islamism, Jihadism, and war received 77% comments that expressed a negative attitude towards these phenomena but did not criticise Islam or Muslims in general. Out of the comments replying to posts about honour culture, 49% were anti-honour culture without criticising Islam or Muslims, and 14% of replies to posts about crime were anti-crime, without criticising Islam or Muslims. The themes Islamism/Jihadism/war and honour culture were also the ones that received the lowest percentage of neutral comments, indicating that commenters were particularly willing to express a clear opinion on these issues. However, this did not, at least in the case of replies to posts about Islamism, Jihadism, and war, entail an inclination to blame Islam or Muslims in general for these phenomena: only 12% of comments replying to posts that focused on this theme category were negative towards Islam or Muslims.

We have now seen how the 12 most commented themes were responded to by Scandinavian Facebook users. The following table displays comparisons between how Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish commenters engaged with the most common themes.

Table 6.1: Ratio of negative to positive comments about Islam in relation to the top 5 most commented themes—comparison by country, (n=negative-positive comments)

	Norway	**Sweden**	**Denmark**
Burka/niqab	4.8 (164-34)	5 (333-68)	2 (701-358)
Islamism/Jihadism/war	2.5 (43-17)	1.1 (39-37)	1.7 (70-42)
Discrimination/racism	1.4 (53-37)	0.6 (82-135)	1.8 (209-118)
Hijab	2.2 (39-18)	4.8 (67-14)	1 (105-102)
Handshaking	5.9 (82-14)	6.8 (34-5)	2.5 (117-47)

As depicted in table 6.1, there were some substantial differences between the countries. For instance, while Norwegian and Swedish commenters wrote around 5 negative comments for every positive comment about the burka and niqab, the Danish commenters wrote “only” twice as many negative as positive comments about the subject. This is interesting given that Denmark has the strictest policy with respect to face-covering clothing, having banned it from public space altogether, while Norway has banned it only in teaching situations, and Sweden has no such national ban. Since these policies largely reflect the different national discourses on the burka and niqab in the Scandinavian countries, the attitudes in the comment sections showed a different pattern than the general public spheres.

The other type of Islamic clothing that was heavily discussed in the comment sections, namely the hijab, also showed a different pattern from the wider Scandinavian public spheres. In the Danish comment sections, there were barely more negative than positive replies to posts about the hijab (1.03 negative-positive ratio, rounded to 1 in the table). In comparison, there were more than twice as many negative as positive comments about the hijab in the Norwegian comment sections, and 4.8 negative comments per positive comment in the Swedish case. It is worth highlighting that the theme category hijab included posts about children wearing the hijab, and that these posts typically received more negative comments than posts about adults wearing the hijab did. Especially posts describing the *Göteborgs-Posten* revelation that 27 out of 40 Swedish pre-schools would be willing to force children to wear the hijab if their parents requested it prompted many negative Swedish comments.

Posts about handshaking, in this context referring to the practice of some Muslims choosing not to shake hands with members of the opposite sex, was criticised heavily in the comment sections in all the three countries. There were, however, national differences with respect to this theme as well: for every positive comment

made in the respective countries' comment sections, there were 2.5 negative Danish comments, 5.9 negative Norwegian comments, and 6.8 negative Swedish comments. This is even though Denmark is the only of the three countries that has passed legislation that requires applicants for naturalisation to shake hands before becoming a citizen.[106] As such, this was similar to the cases with different types of Islamic clothing: Denmark has the most Islam-critical discourse (and laws), but the Norwegian and Swedish commenters more regularly responded negatively to the practice than the Danish commenters did.

Thus, corrective action is again a relevant perspective. Norwegian and Swedish commenters who want laws requiring new citizens to shake hands and stopping Muslims from wearing face veils have a stronger incentive to voice their opinions on these matters than the Danish commenters do. While Danish politicians have already passed laws that have taken care of these concerns for Islam-critical Danes, this has not been the case in Norway and Sweden. Thus, Islam-critical commenters in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections could see a clearer benefit in expressing their opinion on such issues, hoping to convince others that their stance is the correct one. Unlike posts about face veils, the hijab, and handshaking, though, the remaining themes found among the 5 most commented subjects reflected differences in discourse outlined in Chapter 2 to a high degree.

As seen in table 6.1, posts about Islamism/Jihadism/war and discrimination/racism typically received the most negative comments from Norwegian and Danish commenters, respectively. While we saw in figure 6.2 that posts about Islamism/Jihadism/war were overwhelmingly met with comments criticising these phenomena rather than Islam or Muslims in general, some also attributed blame to Islam and Muslims for these phenomena, especially in the Norwegian case. In the

[106] The requirement was passed into law at the very end of the analysed period and put into effect 1 January 2019, after the last day of data collection. See for instance http://globalcit.eu/denmark-introduces-local-citizenship-ceremonies-with-mandatory-handshaking/

Norwegian case, there were for every comment that denied a link between Islamic doctrine or most Muslims and Islamism/Jihadism/war 2.6 comments that argued that such a link exists. The Danish commenters followed with a negative-positive ratio of 1.7, while Swedish commenters were mixed between negative and positive attitudes (1.1 negative-positive ratio). As such, responses to this theme reflected the national differences surrounding discourse on Islam to a larger degree than discussions around Islamic clothing and handshaking, although the idea of Islam and immigration as a threat to security is more prominent in the Danish public sphere than in the Norwegian public sphere (see Chapter 2).

With respect to replies to posts about discrimination and racism, the comment sections can be considered to have mirrored the differences in national public discourse to a large degree. As the context chapter and the analysis of established news media's posts have shown, Sweden has to a higher degree than the other two countries problematised discrimination and racism against Muslims and immigrants. As displayed in table 6.1, for every positive comment about Muslims or Islam below posts about discrimination and racism in the respective countries' comment sections, there were 1.8 negative Danish comments, 1.4 negative Norwegian comments, and 0.6 negative Swedish comments (meaning more Swedish comments were positive than negative towards Islam or Muslims when discussing discrimination and racism).

Sources

In addition to considering the link between the posts' theme and comment sentiment, it was examined whether it mattered for the comments' sentiment whether the main source in the post was a Muslim. The results showed that this did not play a role in the comments' sentiment towards Islam. Comments did, however, vary considerably based on the perspective of the Muslim source. When a Muslim source expressed a liberal view, e.g. advocated for gay rights or gender equality, commenters tended to be largely positive (46% positive, 27% negative responses).

In contrast, when a source expressed a conservative Muslim view, e.g. advocated for the right to wear the niqab or the right not the shake another person's hand, commenters expressed overwhelmingly negative responses (62% negative, 18% positive comments). This indicates that while many commenters show support or tolerance for liberal interpretations of Islam, the same does not apply to more conservative interpretations. This was also indicated in table 6.1, which signalled that commenters were particularly negative to relatively marginal practices in Scandinavia like wearing the burka or niqab and choosing to not shake hands with the opposite sex. Furthermore, when (radical) Islamists were the main source, commenters overwhelmingly criticised Islamism and Jihadism rather than Islam or Muslims in general.

Looking closer at the most prominent source category in terms of position/role, namely politicians (see figure 5.2), the results showed that comments replying to posts with radical right populists as a main source received a nearly equal number of positive and negative comments towards Islam, indicating quite polarised opinions about these parties' rhetoric and policies in the comment sections. It was somewhat surprising that these comments did not more frequently express negativity towards Islam or Muslims, given the overall largely negative sentiments towards Islam found in the comment sections. A possible explanation is that the radical right politicians' rhetoric or policy proposals in some cases were considered too radical, leading to a backlash from many commenters. Examples were The New Right's proposal to make it impossible for people from countries with a substantial Muslim population to obtain citizenship in Denmark and a local Sweden Democrats proposal to ban Islamic clothing—but not other religious clothing—in municipal workplaces. Radical policies like these may have prompted extra criticism of these parties' approach to religious diversity.

In comparison, there were for instance several posts where members of the Swedish Liberal Party argued for a less radical proposal in the form of banning hijab use among children in pre-schools, which was widely supported in the comment sections. Also different from posts with radical right populist sources, posts with social democratic politicians as the main source received nearly twice as many negative as positive comments about Islam. These politicians were, especially in the Swedish comment sections, often accused of not taking challenges with the integration of (Muslim) immigrants seriously.

Link between post sentiment and comment sentiment

We have seen that unlike the largely positive Facebook items published by the established news media (see figure 5.3), the ordinary citizens in the comment sections voiced mostly negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims (see figure 6.1). But did a post's sentiment towards Islam impact the sentiment expressed by commenters replying to that post, and if so, to what degree?

The results displayed a limited link between post and comment sentiment. Negative, positive, and neutral posts about Islam alike were met by a majority of negative comments. Thus, on the one hand the impact of post sentiment was weak in the sense that the dominant negative attitude found in the comment sections manifested regardless of the sentiment of the post. On the other hand, negative posts received the largest proportion of negative comments (57%), positive posts received the largest proportion of positive comments (37%), and neutral posts received the largest proportion of neutral comments (17%). In addition, negative loaded posts (which discussed themes like Islamism/Jihadism/war, honour culture, and crime), logically enough, received the largest proportion of comments criticising these phenomena (without criticising Islam or Muslims in general) (80%). Thus, the post sentiment seems to have influenced replies to some extent, although negative attitudes were ubiquitous in response to most posts.

Comparing news media types

In the previous chapter we saw that the tabloids' posts (and associated articles) were less positive towards Islam and Muslims than the public service broadcasters and broadsheets were, while hybrid broadcasters were found in a position between the PSBs and broadsheets, on one hand, and tabloids, on the other (see table 5.6). Previous research has shown that the content of comments varies according to the profile of the news outlet to which they respond (Su et al., 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). It could thus be expected that the tabloids, and to some extent the hybrid broadcasters, which covered Islam less positively in their posts, would also receive the highest proportion of negative comments.

Table 6.2: Commenters' sentiment towards Islam by media type, percent (N=6797)

Sentiment	**PSBs (1502)**	**Tabloids (3531)**	**Broadsheets (409)**	**HSBs (1355)**
Negative	36 (546)	52 (1834)	31 (126)	43 (581)
Positive	39 (588)	24 (840)	39 (159)	19 (254)
Neutral	5 (118)	9 (305)	12 (48)	6 (78)
Anti-Islamist	17 (250)	16 (552)	19 (76)	33 (442)

As table 6.2 reflects, this was the case to a large degree. Commenters replying to tabloids' and HSBs' posts were largely negative towards Islam, whereas commenters replying to PSBs and broadsheets' posts were in fact somewhat more positive than negative. While more than half of comments (52%) written in response to tabloid's posts and 43% of comments to HSBs posts expressed a negative sentiment towards Islam, the corresponding figures were 36% and 31% for PSBs and broadsheets, respectively. This suggests that, in terms of attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, quite different audiences operate in the comment sections of the various news outlets.

Looking at individual outlets that stood out, the Danish broadsheet *Politiken'*s posts received twice as many positive as negative comments and was the only outlet together with the Danish public broadcaster *DR* whose comments were more often

positive than negative towards Islam. At the other end of the spectrum were comments replying to the HSBs *TV4* (SWE) and *TV2* (NOR) and the tabloids *VG* (NOR), *Dagbladet* (NOR), and *Ekstra Bladet* (DK), which overwhelmingly displayed sceptical attitudes towards Islam.

Counterpublic Discourses

The presented results have until now shown that the news media's Facebook posts generally covered Islam and Muslims positively (see figure 5.3), while the Facebook users commenting on these stories were largely negative towards Islam and Muslims (see figure 6.1). Figure 6.1 also showed that Denmark, the Scandinavian country whose general public sphere is marked by Islam-critical discourse to the highest degree, had the lowest proportion of negative compared to positive comments, while the less Islam-critical Norwegian and Swedish public spheres, were marked by higher numbers of negative compared to positive comments. Still, we have yet to operationalise the theoretical framework (outlined in Chapter 3) in the analysis of the comments to see more explicitly how and to what extent the comment sections were utilised by Facebook users to challenge larger and more powerful publics.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the theoretical framework led to the identification of four distinct subpublics operating within the comment sections: (1) a counterdiscursive anti-Islamist, anti-Islam, and anti-Muslim subpublic; (2) a counterdiscursive subpublic marked by friendly attitudes towards Muslims and Islam; (3) a subpublic engaging in mainstream discourse and expressing moderate opinions found closer to the middle of Hallin's concentric spheres; and there was also semblance of a (4) counterdiscursive Islamist and conservative Islamic subpublic sphere. We will in the following subsections consider to what extent, and in which ways, these subpublics

were present in the analysed comment sections.[107] To do so, this chapter presents and discusses the results relating to the three characteristics of counterpublic discursive patterns of d*econstructing power relations*, *argumentative countering*, and *strengthening a sense of collective identity* (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 471), which were introduced in Chapter 3 and elaborated in Chapter 4.

Deconstructing power relations

Deconstruction of power relations is key to understanding the relative prevalence of different subpublics in the comment sections, as comments with this trait explicitly targeted a superordinate public, which they criticised for being mainstream, dominant, censoring, and/or biased against a (perceived) subordinate public. As such, these comments were unmistakably counterdiscursive in character. The following table shows the extent to which the commenters in this study deconstructed power relations, and in which ways they did so.

Table 6.3: Percent of comments deconstructing power relations (N=6797)[108]

	Norway (1207)		Sweden (1710)		Denmark (3880)	
	Anti-Islam	**Pro-Islam**	**Anti-Islam**	**Pro-Islam**	**Anti-Islam**	**Pro-Islam**
Deconstructing power relations	**5 (61)**	**0 (4)**	**7 (122)**	**1 (10)**	**3 (112)**	**3 (101)**
Mainstream media	1 (17)	0 (3)	1 (12)	0 (4)	0 (17)	1 (32)
Political establishment	1 (9)	0 (1)	2 (40)	0 (1)	1 (23)	1 (49)
Criminal justice system	1 (13)	0	0 (4)	0 (1)	2 (59)	0 (7)
Other actors	0 (6)	0	0 (5)	0	0 (4)	0
Unspecified actor	2 (21)	0	4 (76)	0 (6)	0 (17)	1 (28)

[107] The Islamist/conservative Islamic subpublic sphere is not given further attention due to its highly marginal presence in the comment sections.

[108] If one adds the number of comments that targeted mainstream media, political establishment, criminal justice system, other actors, and unspecified actors, one may get a higher number than the total number of comments that deconstructed power relations. The reason for this is that a commenter could deconstruct power relations in multiple ways, for instance both by criticising the mainstream media and the political establishment. This also goes for the other categories of counterpublic discursive patterns presented below, i.e. a comment could engage with several subcategories of argumentative countering and strengthening identity.

As displayed in table 6.3, there was a marked difference between the Norwegian and Swedish commenters, on the one hand, and the Danish commenters, on the other. In Norway and Sweden, 5% and 7% of the comments deconstructed power relations from an anti-Islam perspective,[109] while close to zero comments (0% and 1%, respectively) did so from an Islam-sympathetic viewpoint. In Denmark, the comments that deconstructed power relations were evenly spread between those negative and those positive towards Islam, each group constituting 3% of the total number of Danish comments. As such, these results provided support for hypothesis 3 of this dissertation, which was theoretically informed by the corrective action perspective:

> H3: Islam-critical counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, the least prevalent in the Danish comment sections, while the Norwegian comment sections will be found between these. Correspondingly, Islam-*positive* counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Danish comment sections and the least prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, with Norway again expected to be in a middle position.

The only part of hypothesis 3 that was not confirmed was that there would be more Norwegian than Swedish commenters sympathetic towards Islam and/or Muslims that engaged in counterpublic discourses. As we saw in table 6.3, Norway and Sweden had very few such comments, indicating that the Islam/Muslim-sympathetic counterpublic was highly marginal in these countries' comment sections. Only in the Danish comment sections was there a noticeable counterpublic that targeted power relations for discriminating Islam, Muslims, and those sympathetic towards Muslims.

It can be argued, of course, that 3%, and 5% and 7% for that matter, indicate a quite low permeation of explicitly counterdiscursive items in the studied comment sections. In other words, it was undoubtedly the mainstream subpublic that

[109] Anti-Islam is here used for brevity and also includes comments that were anti-Islamist.

dominated the comment sections. It belongs to the story, though, that few of the posts that commenters replied to directly discussed the mainstream media, political establishment, or the criminal justice system, meaning that the posts generally did not actively facilitate for Facebook users to publish comments that targeted power relations. Furthermore, the coding of these variables was quite restrictive. Comments that did not engage in comprehensive criticism, e.g. because they only criticised one political party or one news outlet, rather than the entire political establishment or all mainstream media, were not considered to have deconstructed power relations. Had such comments also been included in this category, the number of comments deconstructing power relations would have been significantly higher.[110]

With respect to understanding the differences between the countries demonstrated in table 6.3, a relevant study, which was also mentioned in relation with the formulation of the hypotheses (see Chapter 2), was carried out by Heft et al. (2019). They pointed to the inclusiveness of established media towards right-wing actors and opinions as well as the electoral success of radical right populist parties as key factors influencing the demand for right-wing alternative news sites. In Sweden, where right-wing alternative news outlets are popular, established media have been unaccommodating towards radical right attitudes, and radical right populist parties have (until recently) had low success and been largely shunned by the other parties. In Denmark, where right-wing alternative news media are relatively unpopular, established media have been largely inclusive of far-right positions and actors, and radical right populist parties have had great electoral success and influence (Heft et al., 2019). In Norway, where the Progress Party has not been shunned like the Sweden Democrats has in Sweden but also not had the same influence on discourse

[110] Because the prevalence of these comments was not systematically analysed, it is unclear whether considering these comments as an expression of deconstructing power relations would have influenced the difference between the countries.

as the Danish People's Party, right-wing alternative media are less popular than in Sweden but more popular than in Denmark (Reuters Institute, 2019).

As such, the demand for right-wing alternative media seems to align with the prevalence of comments deconstructing power relations from an Islam-negative perspective in the established news media's comment sections identified in this study (relatively low among Islam-negative Danes, relatively high among Islam-negative Swedes, with Norwegians in a position between the two). The corrective action perspective may therefore be highly relevant for understanding the results: In Sweden, where Islam-critical actors and opinions have been considered deviant, the comments engaged in deconstruction of power relations from an anti-Islamic point of view to the largest extent (7%). In Denmark, where such opinions have been mainstream since the mid-1990s (Andersen et al., 2009; Heinze, 2018; Rydgren, 2010), only 3% of comments did the same. In Norway, where the debate climate around Islam and immigration has been in a position between Sweden and Denmark (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Hovden & Mjelde, 2019; Lövheim, Lindberg, et al., 2018), the percent of comments deconstructing power relations from an anti-Islam viewpoint (5%) is exactly in the middle of the figures from Sweden and Denmark.

Still, that there was an even percentage of anti-Islam and pro-Islam comments that deconstructed power relations in the Danish outlets' comment sections does not, at least on the surface, align with the theory of corrective action. As we have seen, though, the Danish news outlets' posts studied in this dissertation covered Islam more positively than expected (see figure 5.3), meaning that the immediate mass media context of the commenters may have played a role in incentivising Islam-critical Danes to take corrective action. Furthermore, since the focus here is on counterpublic-minded individuals' perceived exclusion rather than exclusion per se (Asen, 2000; Brouwer, 2006; Warner, 2002), and many who identify as right-wing, Islam-critical, or immigrant-critical have been observed to view themselves as

marginalised and censored (Holt, 2018; Løvlie et al., 2018a; Moe et al., 2017; Nygaard, 2019; Thorbjørnsrud, 2017), the prevalence of anti-Islamic comments deconstructing power relations in also the Danish comment sections cannot be considered a major surprise.

This subsection has considered comments that explicitly targeted superordinate publics—comments that undoubtedly were counterdiscursive in character. The following subsection considers to what extent commenters engaged in *argumentative countering* around Islam in the three countries' comment sections.

Argumentative countering

While the commenters that deconstructed power relations explicitly articulated the *perception* that their opinions were marginalised or excluded from the larger public sphere, comments that engaged in argumentative countering typically did not do so.[111] Thus, it was necessary to consider more "objectively" whether these comments can be said to have engaged in counterpublic discourses. Given the many nuances and different contexts involved with studying discourse on Islam in the three Scandinavian countries, identifying objectively how the spheres of opinion is defined in an exact manner is an extremely challenging, if not impossible, task. Therefore, rather than firmly classifying comments as either part of a mainstream or counterpublic, I will towards the end of the subsection give an overall evaluation of whether the findings from this category seems to reflect or oppose the results presented in relation with the deconstruction of power relations category.

As we saw in Chapter 4 (table 4.3), comments were classified according to the arguments they expressed in relation with nine subcategories/topics: (1) Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam, (2) whether they championed other countries' policies/discourse on Islam, (3) Islam and Muslims in general, (4) conversion to

[111] An exception was if the comment both engaged in argumentative countering and deconstructed power relations.

Islam, (5) political labelling, (6) harassment of political opponents and Muslims, (7) handling of Islamists/jihadists, (8) religion in general, and (9) Muslim immigration. We will in this subsection discuss to what extent, and in which ways, the Scandinavian commenters can be considered to have engaged in counterdiscursive speech in relation with these topics. First, though, we consider the extent to which each subcategory was represented in the material.

Table 6.4: Percent of comments engaging with the subcategories of argumentative countering (N=6797)

	Norway (1207)	**Sweden (1710)**	**Denmark (3880)**	**Total (6797)**
Argumentative countering?	80 (966)	86 (1473)	82 (3188)	83 (5627)
Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam	40 (484)	54 (929)	54 (2113)	52 (3526)
Handling of Islamists/ jihadists	29 (345)	23 (386)	15 (570)	19 (1301)
General evaluation of Islam/Muslims	9 (108)	6 (111)	8 (312)	8 (531)
Harassment of political opponents	1 (7)	9 (152)	7 (281)	6 (440)
Religion in general	5 (65)	6 (111)	2 (60)	3 (236)
Conversion to Islam	3 (38)	4 (67)	3 (130)	3 (235)
Muslim immigration	2 (24)	2 (30)	4 (145)	3 (199)
Political labelling	2 (27)	3 (46)	3 (115)	3 (188)
Championing other countries	1 (17)	5 (91)	1 (39)	2 (148)

As table 6.4 shows, the vast majority of comments (83%) engaged with at least one of the subcategories/topics of argumentative countering. It should be reiterated that this does here not mean that 83% of comments engaged in counterdiscursive speech. Given that this category did not firmly classify comments as either mainstream or counterpublic, a question mark was added behind argumentative

countering to illustrate that these comments not necessarily expressed counterpublic discourses. As we will see, however, all nine subcategories did feature some comments that can be considered counterdiscursive, as they seemed to challenge the bounds of mainstream discourse in various ways.

Not surprisingly given the major focus on face veils and Islamism/terrorism/war in the news media's posts (see figure 5.1), it was found that the two subcategories of argumentative countering that commenters most often engaged with was *Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam* and *handling of Islamists/jihadists*. As illustrated in table 6.4, more than half of the comments (52%) discussed Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam and nearly one fifth (19%) gave their view on how to deal with Islamists and jihadists. The Islamic practice subcategory was the most prominent in all the three countries, but Islamic practices were higher on the agenda of Swedish and Danish commenters (54% of all comments) than among Norwegian commenters (40%). Given this subcategory's prominence, it will be given the most attention in this subsection.

We observed already in figure 6.2 that Scandinavian commenters were highly negative towards certain practices associated with Islam, for instance the wearing of face veils, but how did commenters view this and other practices in more detail? Did commenters want legislation that made Islamic practices completely forbidden, did they want bans in specific areas of society, or did they consider a ban to be unnecessary? Not least, how did Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish commenters compare in this regard? The following table focuses on the two most frequently discussed Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam in the comment sections, namely the burka/niqab and the hijab, while the "other" category comprises all other Islamic practices coded in this study.

Table 6.5: Attitude towards the three most commented-upon Islamic practices/traits associated with Islam, percent (n=3445)[112]

	Burka/niqab (2052)			**Hijab (533)**			**Other (860)**		
	NOR (208)	**SWE (475)**	**DEN (1369)**	**NOR (108)**	**SWE (144)**	**DEN (281)**	**NOR (153)**	**SWE (274)**	**DEN (433)**
Complete ban	45 (94)	65 (311)	57 (775)	5 (5)	7 (9)	3 (9)	7 (11)	12 (32)	27 (118)
Limited ban	35 (72)	6 (29)	2 (21)	23 (24)	18 (34)	17 (49)	59 (91)	50 (136)	33 (143)
Criticism	2 (4)	10 (45)	4 (50)	34 (36)	45 (61)	21 (58)	12 (18)	4 (12)	9 (41)
Acceptance	16 (34)	14 (64)	29 (391)	33 (35)	20 (28)	51 (143)	17 (26)	19 (51)	24 (106)
Unclear	2 (4)	5 (26)	10 (132)	6 (8)	9 (12)	4 (22)	5 (7)	16 (43)	6 (25)

As shown in table 6.5, the dominant negative attitude found in the comment sections was also clearly manifested when considering in more detail how commenters wanted to handle certain Islamic practices. Of interest from a counterpublic perspective, the Swedish Facebook users, whom Chapter 2 described as operating within the most Islam/Muslim-sympathetic public sphere in the Scandinavian context, published the highest proportion of comments that sought a complete ban of face veils (65%). They also published the lowest proportion of comments that expressed acceptance/tolerance of face veils, although there was only a small difference between Norwegian and Swedish commenters (16% and 14%, respectively). The Danish commenters, whom Chapter 2 described as operating within the most Islam-hostile public sphere in Scandinavia, had the highest percentage of comments that expressed acceptance/tolerance of face veils (29%). Norwegian commenters were compared to the Swedish and Danish commenters more content with a *limited* ban of face veils, although the complete

[112] Comments that expressed an opinion on two or more Islamic practices are not included in this table, and *n* is therefore not the same as for table 6.4.

ban category was also more prevalent than the limited ban opinion in the Norwegian comment sections (45% versus 35%).[113]

Given that 65% of Swedish comments discussing the burka and niqab argued for a complete ban of face veils, and that Sweden has no national law regulating the use of burka and niqab, does this mean that these comments engaged in counterpublic discourses? Similarly, do the 45% of Norwegian comments arguing for a *complete* ban of face veils indicate that 45% of Norwegian comments discussing this theme were counterdiscursive? This depends on where one draws the line for what can be considered counterdiscursive argumentation and on what information one chooses to emphasise. If only the immediate context of the commenters (i.e. the 602 posts analysed in this study) were to be taken into account, it would be found that to ban face veils in public space in Norway and Sweden is, with the exception of artist Tommy Körberg in the Swedish context, [114] only endorsed by the radical right populist parties FrP and the (previously) deviant SD. This is unlike Denmark where the news media reported that a clear majority in Parliament passed legislation banning face covering clothing. Based on the immediate context, then, these views may be considered somewhat radical in the Swedish and Norwegian public spheres, especially in Sweden, where no national ban exists. At the same time, if one broadens the scope to include more information, this view appears to be well within the sphere of legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986).

[113] It is worth noting, though, that the posts to which the Facebook users replied may have influenced these results to some extent. Given that most Norwegian posts about face veils reported that the Norwegian Parliament had passed legislation to ban face covering clothing in teaching situations (but not in other situations), many comments wrote short concurring answers and were thus coded as expressing support for a limited ban. Most Swedish and Danish posts about the burka and niqab, were, unlike the Norwegian posts, mainly about the Danish ban of face-covering clothing from public space altogether, and therefore facilitated more directly for comments to argue for a complete ban of face veils.

[114] https://www.aftonbladet.se/nojesbladet/a/gPlr05/tommy-korberg-tack-inte-ansiktet?fbclid=IwAR0FKkNuq4ldulSJxVhrRfrQWZAar6b08pVdpGpzLH2nkq7i08x1oDIZIMk

From 2002 to the studied year of 2018, Swedish elected officials introduced six bills in parliament with the aim to prohibit the use of the burka and niqab. Although five of these came from the Sweden Democrats, one of the anti-face veil bills was also introduced by the Centre Party (Frisk & Gillette, 2019, p. 471). Moreover, representatives from other mainstream parties as well as prominent social commentators and journalists have also expressed a wish to ban face veils from public space altogether, both in Sweden and in Norway.[115] Thus, if one takes this information into account, arguing that face veils should be completely banned from public space does not seem like a very radical view.

It is also worth considering the commenters' views towards the hijab. As demonstrated in table 6.5, commenters were much less likely to argue for a ban of the hijab than what was the case with the burka and niqab, although criticism of the hijab was widespread. When commenters argued for banning the hijab, they typically concentrated on certain groups or spaces where it should be banned (e.g. for children in schools and in certain workplaces), i.e. a limited/partial ban. These viewpoints were also commonly expressed in the news media's posts, meaning these comments cannot be considered to have engaged in argumentative countering. There was a small number of comments, though, that argued that the hijab should be completely banned from public space (4% of Norwegian comments, 7% of Swedish comments, and 3% of Danish comments discussing the hijab). Commenters voicing this opinion seem to have engaged in argumentative countering in all three national contexts, both when considering the immediate and

[115] See for instance
https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=91&artikel=6598006
https://www.svd.se/darfor-bor-aven-sverige-infora-burkaforbud
https://www.svd.se/utred-slojforbud-i-grund-och-forskola
https://www.dagsavisen.no/debatt/forby-niqab-og-burka-i-norge-1.450942
https://www.nettavisen.no/mener/forby-niqab-og-burka-for-det-blir-for-sent/3423274998.html

the broader context. In the immediate context, no post featured the opinion that hijabs should be completely banned from public space, and only actors in the deviant sphere/on the border of the sphere of legitimate controversy would argue that the hijab should be completely banned in any of the three Scandinavian countries.

Interestingly, half of Danish comments (51%) showed acceptance/tolerance for the hijab, while the corresponding figures for the Norwegian and Swedish comments were 33% and 20%, respectively. As such, the comment section also on this topic showed a diametrically opposite pattern to the wider socio-political context around Islam, outlined in Chapter 2. Furthermore, as we saw above, Sweden had the highest portion of comments that wanted a complete ban of face veils. This highlights the potential relevance of the corrective action perspective for understanding some of the findings in this study.

The other Islamic practices/traits often associated with Islam that the commenters discussed were refusal to shake hands with members of the opposite sex, Islamic private schools, halal food, circumcision, Islamic holidays, calls to prayer, mosques, and the Quran. As demonstrated in table 6.5, the Danish commenters were more eager to implement *complete* bans for these practices/traits than the Norwegian and Swedish commenters were. This can be explained by Danish Facebook users' view of not shaking hands with members of the opposite sex, which was the third most discussed practice associated with Islam in the comment sections. While not shown in the table, 36% of Danish comments addressing this practice argued that shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex should be an absolute requirement to obtain a Danish citizenship. As was mentioned earlier in the dissertation, Denmark is the only of the three countries that has passed legislation that requires applicants for naturalisation to shake hands before becoming a citizen (although the law was put into effect after the last day of data collection).

Furthermore, several Danish posts analysed in this study featured views from politicians who wanted such a ban (as well as views from politicians who opposed it). As such, this viewpoint is well within the sphere of legitimate controversy in the Danish public sphere. Norwegian and Swedish commenters largely concentrated on problems they saw with not shaking hands in more small-scale situations, such as in job interviews and when working as a schoolteacher, and thus argued more for partial bans. Similar viewpoints were also reflected in the Norwegian and Swedish news media's posts, suggesting that Facebook users generally did not engage in argumentative countering in relation with this practice.

The same cannot be said for the comments that argued that mosques, the Quran, and Islam altogether should be banned. These unmistakably deviant comments, which undoubtedly can be considered to have engaged in argumentative countering, were, however, marginal in all three countries' comment sections (0.6% of the total number of Swedish comments, 0.3% of Danish comments, and 0.2% of Norwegian comments). As was discussed in Chapter 1, it is likely that moderation rules have stopped certain clearly deviant comments from being published or led to such comments being removed. Thus, they would not have been registered in the presented results.

We will now consider the second most prevalent subcategory of argumentation, namely *handling of Islamists/jihadists*. As shown in the following table, the commenters were highly negative towards these radical actors (see also figure 6.2).

Table 6.6: Prevalence of arguments used in relation with the subcategory handling of Islamists/jihadists, percent of comments engaging with this subcategory (n=1301)

	Norway (345)	**Sweden (386)**	**Denmark (570)**	**Total (1301)**
Not allow returns from ISIS territory	6 (19)	3 (13)	53 (302)	26 (334)
Deport/revoke citizenship	31 (108)	14 (55)	12 (69)	18 (232)
Stop public support/funding	28 (97)	10 (38)	0 (2)	11 (137)
Exclude from organisations	0	23 (88)	0 (2)	7 (90)
Forgive/not punish	2 (6)	3 (10)	2 (11)	2 (27)
Imprison	5 (18)	1 (4)	0	2 (22)
Sentence to death/kill extrajudicially	1 (3)	1 (5)	2 (13)	2 (21)
Allow returns from ISIS territory and sentence	0	0	2 (12)	1 (12)
Equivalate with the USA/the West/Israel	0	1 (3)	1 (7)	1 (10)
Unspecified condemnation	19 (66)	36 (140)	25 (143)	27 (349)
Unclear[116]	8 (28)	8 (30)	2 (9)	5 (67)

As displayed in table 6.6, the most common viewpoints were that those who had travelled to ISIS territory in Syria should not be allowed to return to Scandinavia (26% of comments discussing Islamists/jihadists), that Islamists/jihadists should be deported and/or lose their citizenship (18%), and that Islamists/jihadists should not receive economic support or funding from the state (11%). It should also be noted that more than one quarter of comments addressing Islamists or jihadists (27%) condemned these actors without specifying how they should be handled.

[116] The difference between the “unspecified condemnation” comments and the “unclear” comments was that while the former clearly criticised Islamists/jihadists, it could not be discerned what the latter type of comments meant about these actors.

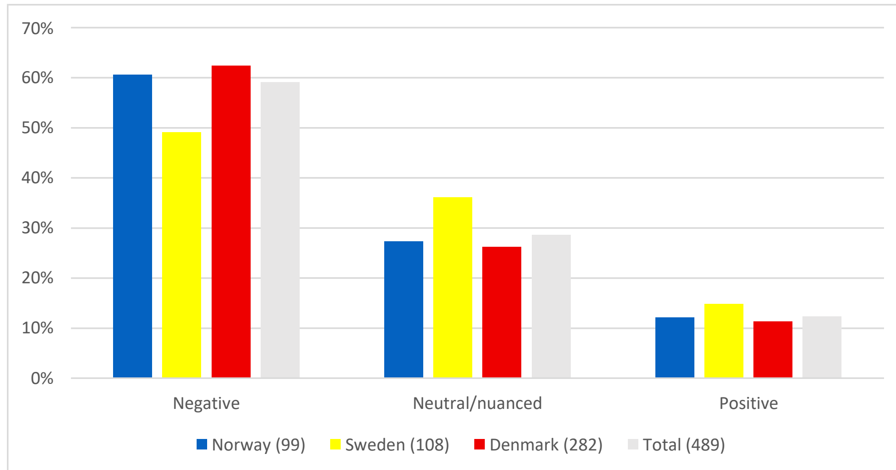
The Swedish comment sections had the highest percentage of comments that condemned Islamists/jihadists without specifying what measure to take to address the problems they pose, Norwegian comments emphasised that Islamists/jihadists should be deported or lose their citizenship, while the Danish commenters primarily argued that members who had travelled to ISIS territory should be not allowed to return to Scandinavia.[117] The most radical arguments, which had no or highly marginal support in the established news media's posts, were that Islamists/jihadists should receive the death penalty or be killed extrajudicially (2%), that they should be forgiven for their (criminal) actions (2%), and that Islamists/jihadists are no worse than the West and/or Israel (1%). There were no major differences between the countries in this regard. As such, only a small percentage of what may be considered counterdiscursive arguments were found in the three countries' comment sections in relation with this subcategory, some of which represented diametrically opposed views on how to handle Islamists and jihadists.

The third most prevalent subcategory of argumentative countering, *general evaluation of Islam/Muslims*, was found in 8% of comments (see table 6.4). These comments were classified as either negative, neutral/nuanced, or positive. Negative comments gave negative essentialist/generalising descriptions of the religion of Islam and/or its adherents. This included, for instance, comments describing Islam/Muslims as inherently violent, intolerant, and incompatible with modern (Western) societies. Positive comments gave positive essentialist/generalising descriptions of Islam and/or Muslims, e.g. described Islam/Muslims as

[117] The character of the posts that discussed Islamists and jihadists substantially influenced how the commenters wrote about the topic. For instance, because relatively many Danish posts focused on a man who had travelled from Denmark to ISIS territory, numerous Danish comments focused on that ISIS fighters should not be allowed to return to the country. Similarly, because several Swedish posts reported that (radical) Islamists had infiltrated certain organisations in Swedish society (but few similar stories were found in the Norwegian and Danish posts), Swedish commenters were clearly more preoccupied with excluding Islamists from organisations than Norwegian and Danish commenters were.

fundamentally peaceful, while neutral/nuanced comments stressed that Islam can be interpreted in several ways.

Figure 6.3: General evaluation of Islam and/or Muslims (n=489)



As depicted in figure 6.3,[118] the Facebook users' general evaluations of Islam and Muslims were mainly negative. If we look at the grey bars, which display the total number of comments within each group, it was found that 59% of comments were negative, 29% were neutral, and 12% were positive. In other words, the overwhelmingly negative attitude towards Islam found in the Scandinavian comment sections (see figure 6.1) was also clearly reflected in this subcategory. As indicated by the yellow bars in figure 6.3, the Swedish comments' general assessments of Islam and Muslims were less often negative than the Norwegian and Danish comment sections were: Swedish commenters published the lowest number of negative comments (49%) and the highest number of neutral/nuanced (36%) and positive comments (15%). The Danish comments (illustrated by the red bars) were

[118] Unclear comments, i.e. comments that gave a general evaluation of Islam and/or Muslims but whose viewpoint could not be discerned, were not included in the figure. Thus, the number of comments in figure 6.3 does not match the numbers from table 6.4.

more negative towards Islam and/or Muslims in general than were the Norwegian comments (illustrated by the blue bars), but the difference was marginal.

What do these results tell us about the counterpublicity found in the three countries' comment sections? Chapter 2 described three quite different national public spheres around Islam: the Islam-hostile Danish public sphere, the ambivalent Norwegian public sphere, and the Islam-tolerant Swedish public sphere. Based on this model, it is apparent that it is particularly the Swedish commenters that engage in argumentative countering by depicting the religion of Islam and its adherents in a negative essentialising way. Although figure 6.3 showed that the Swedish commenters published the lowest proportion of such comments, these comments can be considered less legitimate in the Swedish context than in the Norwegian, and, particularly, the Danish context. As such, it is reasonable to view the Swedish commenters as those that engaged in anti-Islamic argumentative countering in relation with this subcategory in the clearest way. Correspondingly, the positive essentialist/generalising depictions in the Danish comment sections might be considered to challenge the dominant Islam-negative discourse found in the Danish public sphere. As such, both anti-and pro-Islam counterpublic discourses are arguably observed within this subcategory. As indicated in figure 6.3, though, it is primarily the anti-Islam counterpublic that influences the comment sections (see also table 6.3).

If we consider the immediate context of the commenters, however, all the three countries' posts were either generally positive or mixed in its coverage of Islam, depending on whether also the negatively *loaded* posts were considered negative (see figure 5.3). Thus, if we emphasise the immediate context of the comment sections, it may be a stretch to classify positive essentialising comments about Islam and Muslims as counterdiscursive, also in the Danish context. That said, few posts among those classified as depicting Islam positively made positive *essentialist*

descriptions of the sort found in the comment sections (e.g. that Islam is inherently peaceful and that all Muslims are wonderful people), especially in the Danish posts.

The same goes for the negative (essentialist/generalising) comments; these were typically much more radical than the posts that were classified as negative. An exception was the Danish posts, where the tabloids *BT* and *Ekstra Bladet* published several items where Islam and Muslims were described in a negative generalising manner.[119] Given the explicitly negative character of several of the Danish tabloids' posts, it seems more reasonable to view the Danish comments that described Islam and Muslims in a negative essentialising way as a reinforcement of an already Islam-sceptic public sphere than as a form of argumentative countering. It is worth remarking, though, that there is a considerable difference between the Danish tabloids and the other Danish media types' coverage of Islam (see page 171).

The Norwegian commenters' immediate context was, similarly to the Swedish commenters, rarely marked by posts that depicted Islam and Muslims in a negative generalising way.[120] Based on this information, it can to some extent be argued that also Norwegian commenters that described Islam and Muslims as e.g. inherently violent and intolerant engaged in argumentative countering. This is, however, not as clear as in the Swedish case.

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[119] See for instance
https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/danskpolitik/vermund-retter-partifaelle-stop-statsborgerskab-til-alle-mennesker-fra-muslimske-lande/7279012
https://www.bt.dk/samfund/dansk-folkeparti-langer-ud-efter-julearrangement-paa-noerrebro-det-provokerer-mig?fbclid=IwAR1ahNIgVLvpxxKNzXi6fwtMiQNgAlKkDPcpfEOT_Ssflj8f4sYdE4jBPaE

[120] There were, however, exceptions:
https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/XwQ9px/folkevandringen-fra-muslimske-land-boer-opphoere-per-willy-amundsen
https://www.nrk.no/ytring/koranskole-i-kirken-1.14249139?fbclid=IwAR2nsQ43oHus7TaZw0qAtslTpTPORoJwFixufT8NOPrIczkF20WjKyeL8KU

We will now consider the fourth most common subcategory of argumentation, namely *harassment of political opponents*. As shown in table 6.4, the topic was almost absent from the Norwegian comment sections but was addressed in 9% and 7% of Swedish and Danish comments, respectively. The comments of this subcategory were classified into one of three groups: (1) harassment is acceptable towards Muslims, (2) harassment is acceptable towards people on the far right, or (3) harassment is (always) unacceptable. In addition, comments could be coded as "unclear" if they addressed harassment of political opponents without being clear on what they thought about such behaviour. The results are shown in the following table. Because there were only 7 Norwegian comments that engaged with this subcategory, the results from the Norwegian comment sections are not presented for this subcategory.

Table 6.7: Attitude towards harassment of political opponents, percent(n=)

Harassment is…	**Sweden (152)**	**Denmark (281)**
Acceptable towards Muslims	5 (8)	22 (62)
Acceptable towards people on the far right	0	1 (4)
Unacceptable	80 (122)	42 (119)
Unclear	14 (22)	34 (96)

As displayed in table 6.7, the results indicate a considerable difference between the Swedish and Danish Facebook users. While 80% of Swedish comments discussing harassment of political opponents clearly expressed that this was unacceptable behaviour, this was true for only 42% of Danish comments. While 5% of Swedish comments discussing harassment condoned harassment of Muslims, the corresponding figure for the Danish comments was 22%. In the Danish case, these comments were primarily responses to posts describing women who had chosen to keep using the niqab after the ban of face-covering clothing had been implemented.

In the Swedish case, the few comments that found harassment of Muslims acceptable endorsed threats against mosques and supported politicians whom the tabloid *Expressen* revealed had posted hateful content about Muslims online.

Comments endorsing harassment can clearly be placed in Hallin's (1986) deviant sphere, in all the Scandinavian countries' larger public spheres. As such, commenters who expressed this view undoubtedly engaged in argumentative countering. The number of Danish comments that accepted harassment of Muslims particularly stood out. Therefore, the results from this subcategory emphasise that, while the Danish public sphere generally can be considered quite Islam-sceptic (see Chapter 2), there are still signs of an active anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim group of Danes who use the comment sections of established news media to further challenge the bounds of legitimate discourse.

We have so far in this subsection been presented to the four most discussed subcategories of argumentative countering. With respect to the remaining subcategories, *religion in general*, *conversion to Islam*, *Muslim immigration*, *political labelling*, and *championing other countries*, these were found in 2–3% of the analysed comments (see table 6.4). As these topics were relatively infrequent compared to the other subcategories of argumentation, the presentation and discussion of the results from these subcategories will focus strictly on the comments that may be considered counterdiscursive.[121] Differences and similarities between the countries are addressed when relevant.

With respect to *religion in general*, this subcategory preoccupied Swedish and Norwegian commenters more than Danish ones (see table 6.4). The only claim that can be considered to constitute argumentative countering within this subsection, though, was expressed by Facebook users who contended that religion should be completely banned from public space. This was, however, a highly marginal

[121] Full results from all the subcategories are presented in Appendix 3.

argument, which was only found in 11 comments. This is 5% of the number of comments that voiced a view on religion in general but only 0,2% of the 6797 comments analysed in this study.

Regarding *conversion to Islam*, commenters seemed to relatively frequently challenge the immediate (and broader) context in which they operated compared with what was the case with religion in general. While none of the established news media's posts about conversion portrayed converting to Islam as something crazy or idiotic,[122] this viewpoint was widespread among the Facebook users who discussed conversion: around half of the comments that addressed the topic described converting to Islam as something deeply problematic/crazy/idiotic. This included comments denouncing the converts themselves as crazy and idiots, both by using text and through posting ridiculing pictures and GIFs. As such, with the sociopolitical context in mind, particularly the Swedish, and, to some extent, the Norwegian, comments engaging with this subcategory seem to have expressed counterpublic discourses. If we emphasise the relatively Islam-amicable immediate context of the studied comment sections (see figure 5.3), though, all three countries' Facebook users expressing this view, also the Danish ones, can plausibly be considered to have engaged in argumentative countering in relation with this topic. It should be stated, though, that these radical comments did not amount to more than 2% of the total number of comments in the three countries' comment sections.

Comments discussing the subcategory *Muslim immigration* were, as already indicated in figure 6.2, split between two almost equal groups of comments: on the one side were the individuals that argued that Muslim immigration should be banned, and on the other side were those who rejected this view. The latter group

[122] *Ekstra Bladet* published a post in which they problematised conversion to Islam, with quite a sensationalist framing: https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/samfund/jespers-13-aarige-datter-konverterede-til-islam-jeg-er-bange-for-folk-fordoemmer-hende/7178169
The post did not, however, depict converting to Islam as something deeply problematic or crazy, but rather as something that people could react negatively to because of unjustified xenophobia.

did typically not specify how many (Muslim) immigrants Norway/Sweden/Denmark should admit, as they were primarily concerned with denouncing the idea that an entire religious group should be prohibited from migrating to the country. Only 2 (Danish) comments out of the 6797 comments analysed in this study argued that their country should have completely open borders. Although none of the news media's posts presented a view on Muslim immigration that was akin to something like open borders, the fact that there were only two such comments shows that Islam/Muslim-sympathetic counterpublic comments were virtually absent within this subcategory.

The Islam/Muslim-sceptic counterpublic, however, seems to have been relatively active in the comment sections that discussed Muslim immigration.[123] There were more Swedish and Danish comments that argued for than that argued against banning Muslim immigration, and there were only slightly more comments that opposed such a ban than that endorsed it in the Norwegian comment sections. Based on the sociopolitical context (outlined in Chapter 2), the Swedish and Norwegian commenters who advocated for banning Muslim immigration can be considered to have engaged in argumentative countering; the idea of completely blocking Muslims from migrating to the country is a contrast to the view of the Islam-amicable Sweden and ambivalent Norway. The Danish commenters who advocated for such a ban, though, seems to be more in line with the Islam-hostile Danish public sphere, which was described in Chapter 2.

If we concentrate on the immediate context of the commenters, it was, as we have seen (e.g. in figure 5.3), quite positive towards Islam, suggesting perhaps that also the anti-Islam Danish Facebook users engaged in counterpublic discourses around the topic of immigration. Several of the posts that the Danish news media published

[123] In terms of absolute numbers, though, these comments were rare, at least in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections (see table 6.4).

about Muslim immigration, however, quoted far right politicians from DF and The New Right arguing that Muslim immigration should be banned.[124] Consequently, this argument seems to be placed firmly within the sphere of legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986) in the Danish public sphere.

The eight most common subcategory of argumentation, *political labelling*, was found in 3% of comments (see table 6.4). From a counterpublic perspective, the most interesting labels were those that went beyond legitimate discourse, which in this case especially applied to the set of labels racist/Nazi/fascist and Islamist/terrorist. The former set of labels were generally used by Islam-friendly commenters, whereas the latter was only used by those with anti-Islam attitudes. In all the three countries, the former set of labels was the most common of the all the political labels found in the comment sections, potentially indicating that the Islam-friendly counterpublic was more active than the Islam-sceptic counterpublic in relation with this subcategory: around half of the Norwegian (48%) and Danish comments (51%) that engaged in political labelling used at least one of the words racist, Nazi, or fascist to describe (the views of) a political opponent. Among the Swedish comments, this set of labels was used in more 78% of the comments engaging in political labeling.[125]

Given the sociopolitical context, it is, however, not necessarily the case that branding someone a racist, Nazi, or fascist can be considered engaging in argumentative countering, especially in the Swedish public sphere. In the studied

[124] https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2018-10-27-vermund-det-er-vores-land-og-vi-bestemmer-hvem-vi-lukker-ind
https://www.bt.dk/debat/det-kan-ganske-enkelt-ikke-lade-sig-goere?fbclid=IwAR0GvC9mFk_2B1xXuR7TPKvSfQmC6xeyRH_lipZR0y4yvJGKi8_VfgmOCYE
https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/danskpolitik/vermund-retter-partifaelle-stop-statsborgerskab-til-alle-mennesker-fra-muslimske-lande/7279012
https://www.bt.dk/politik/haard-melding-fra-nye-borgerlige-muslimer-skal-haemmes-paa-alle-maader?fbclid=IwAR1LtGvZf9icJuUeoy71lvvFEv9PohZRZ4ZrR-QMKo0dIZKfaqNN84FajFY
[125] It is worth remarking, though, that in absolute numbers, these figures only amounted to a two-digit number of comments in each country.

comment sections, these labels were typically used to describe radical right populist parties and their members. As we saw in Chapter 2, these parties have been included in the mainstream to widely different degrees in the Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, unlike in Norway and Denmark, the idea of structural racism has been ubiquitous in Swedish public discourse (Andersen, 2019; Dahl, 2019). Given this background, the Swedish commenters using these labels can hardly be seen as part of a counterpublic, unless they themselves *perceive* their opinions to be marginalised or excluded from the larger public sphere (Asen, 2000). In Norway and Denmark, where the radical right populist parties have been a part of the mainstream on a different level than in Sweden, these political labels, especially Nazi and fascist, are a lot more controversial. Facebook users labelling political opponents this way in the Norwegian and Danish comment sections can thus more plausibly be considered to express counterpublic discourse than Facebook users engaging in similar rhetoric in the Swedish comment sections.

With respect to the subcategory *championing other countries*, i.e. comments that explicitly endorsed other countries for their policies or discourse around Islam, it was almost solely identified in Islam-critical and anti-Islamist comments. The only exceptions were three Danish comments that considered the Swedish debate climate refreshing and more reasonable than the Danish one. The analysis found that the most common "role model" for Norwegians and Swedes was Denmark, while Danes pointed to Austria and Switzerland.[126] The commenters championed these countries for their tough approach towards radical Islamism and certain practices associated with Islam, especially the use of face veils. Swedish Facebook

[126] A bit surprisingly, few commenters pointed to Eastern European countries as role models. At the same time, none of the news media posts the commenters engaged with in this study wrote about these countries, meaning that there was no such content to which the commenters could reply. Conversely, several posts reported about events in the countries that were championed explicitly by several commenters (e.g. Denmark, Austria, and Switzerland).

users engaged with this subcategory in 5% of comments, while the corresponding figure in the Norwegian and Danish comment sections was only 1% (see table 6.4).

The fact that the Swedish commenters were more eager to champion other countries than the Norwegian and Danish commenters were, may imply that the (anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim) Swedish commenters were the least happy with their own country's policy and national public sphere, which would be an indication of a more active (Islam-sceptic) counterpublic sphere in the Swedish comment sections. Similarly, from the corrective action perspective, it is a signal that the Swedish commenters are more eager to "correct" certain wrongs around Islam and Islamism than the Norwegian and Danish commenters are. As we saw in table 6.3, the results from the deconstruction of power relations point in the same direction. In fact, if we look closer at the comments identified as championing other countries, we find that these were sometimes combined with deconstruction of power relations. As one Swedish commenter wrote: ”Once again, Denmark leads the way, while Swedish leftist politicians and mainstream media keep on whining." As such, the Swedish commenters seem to have engaged in Islam-sceptic counterpublic discourse in relation to this subcategory to a higher degree than the Norwegian and Danish commenters did.

We have now considered the nine subcategories of argumentation. Although there are differences between the subcategories, the overall picture is arguably that argumentative countering among those critical towards Islam is most common among Swedish commenters, followed by Norwegian commenters, and then Danish commenters. This is also in line with the findings from the deconstructing power relations category. This is not necessarily because the Swedish commenters engaged in the most Islam-negative argumentation and the Danish commenters engaged in the least Islam-negative argumentation, but rather because several of the Islam-negative arguments are less legitimate in the Swedish public sphere than in the

Danish public sphere. For instance, while a substantial proportion of Danish comments described Islam and/or Muslims in a negative essentialist manner (see figure 6.3) and wanted a ban on Muslim immigration, these arguments can be considered more legitimate in the Danish context than in the Swedish and Norwegian contexts. This is seen clearly in the wider sociopolitical context (outlined in Chapter 2) and to some degree also reflected by the immediate context of the commenters (i.e. the news media's posts).

The Islam/Muslim-*sympathetic* counterpublic was generally marginally represented in the subcategories of argumentative countering, although there were some exceptions, especially in the Danish comment sections. This was for instance related to *general evaluation of Islam/Muslims* and *political labelling*. As was pointed out above, this is not necessarily because the Danish commenters' arguments were more Islam/Muslim-friendly than the Norwegian and Swedish commenters' arguments. It can be understood, however, by Islam/Muslim-friendly arguments' less legitimate position in the Danish public sphere compared with the Swedish and Norwegian public spheres.

Overall, then, although a clear percentage of comments that engaged in argumentative countering was not identified due to the infeasibility of decisively classifying certain arguments as either mainstream or counterdiscursive, it can be argued that the results from the argumentative countering category give further support to hypothesis 3, which was theoretically informed by the corrective action perspective:

> H3: Islam-critical counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, the least prevalent in the Danish comment sections, while the Norwegian comment sections will be found between these. Correspondingly, Islam-*positive* counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Danish comment

sections and the least prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, with Norway again expected to be in a middle position.

Again, though, the results do not really support the prediction that Islam-positive counterpublic discourses would be more prevalent in the Norwegian comment sections than in the Swedish comment sections.

In the following subsection, we will consider the prevalence of the third, and last, category of counterpublic discourse, namely *strengthening a sense of collective identity*.

Strenghtening identity

The strengthening identity category coded all publics operating within the comment sections' efforts to strengthen a sense of collective identity, rather than only those associated with a subordinate (counter)public. The main reason for this is, as has been described, the many nuances needed to be taken into account in this comparative study, making it challenging to decisively classify comments as either a part of a mainstream- or a counter-public. Furthermore, it was found that both commenters with radical views and commenters with moderate views towards Islam strengthened a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals, which made it interesting to code this characteristic also in relation with more moderate/mainstream comments. As was the case with deconstruction of power relations and argumentative countering, though, the primary focus is on discussing the results in relation to the *counter*publics operating in the comment sections, both in terms of prevalence and type (i.e. subcategory).

Commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals in 5 ways. This involved publishing *emotional content*, writing in an *impolite tone*, expressing a sense of personal belonging to a community (*personal identification*), engaging in *alarmist* rhetoric, and *identifying with a political party or politician*. The values coded for the subcategories/variables were typically "yes" or

“no”, i.e. the subcategory was either present or not present in the comment. The following table, which focuses on the comments that were coded as expressing a positive or negative sentiment towards Islam, shows the prevalence of the different subcategories in the studied comment sections.

Table 6.8: Percent of positive and negative comments strengthening a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals (N=6797)

	Norway		**Sweden**		**Denmark**	
	Positive (218)	**Negative (539)**	**Positive (395)**	**Negative (742)**	**Positive (1227)**	**Negative (1808)**
Strengthening identity	73 (160)	66 (355)	68 (267)	68 (507)	78 (954)	71 (1285)
…Emotional content	70 (152)	61 (327)	65 (255)	63 (467)	75 (915)	67 (1208)
…Impolite tone	6 (13)	11 (59)	5 (18)	9 (67)	11 (132)	18 (332)
…Personal identification	13 (28)	9 (50)	11 (43)	9 (68)	11 (136)	12 (215)
…Alarmism	0 (1)	2 (9)	2 (6)	3 (25)	2 (21)	3 (52)
…Political identification	0	1 (4)	1 (2)	3 (19)	1 (7)	1 (21)

As indicated in table 6.8, the strengthening identity category was highly prevalent in the material. In particular, Danish comments voicing a positive sentiment towards Islam were found to strengthen a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals to a high degree (78% of positive Danish comments). Similarly, Norwegian comments that were positive towards Islam were also more frequently identified within this category (73%) than Norwegian negative comments (66%), whereas in the Swedish comment sections the two groups were equally represented (68%). It should be noted, however, that in terms of absolute numbers, comments expressing a negative sentiment towards Islam dominated every subcategory of strengthening identity.

Emotional content was particularly widespread in the comment sections, especially in the positive comments. As emotional language is a common feature of comment sections, it should not be assumed that the extensive use of emotional content is

only spurred on by the studied topic. That said, debates around Islam and immigration have been noted to be emotional, heated, and polarised (Brox, 2009; Eriksen, 2011; Hagelund, 2004a, 2004b; Stærk, 2011). From this perspective, it is certainly possible that these high numbers are related to the character of the debate around this particular topic.

A more relevant focus here is, however, what the emotional content subcategory can tell us about the counterpublicity in the comment sections. In isolation, it seems to tell us very little, given that the subcategory was widespread in all comments.[127] At the same time, if we compare the comments that were clearly counterdiscursive, i.e. those coded as deconstructing power relations (see table 6.3), with those that did not target superordinate publics, we can see that the explicitly counterdiscursive comments stood out from the rest. Although not shown in the table above, it was found that 72% of the explicitly counterdiscursive comments and 66% of the rest of the comments were emotional. In particular, the positive and anti-Islamist comments that deconstructed power relations were found within this subcategory, as 77% of both types of comments featured emotional content. As such, the results indicate that counterpublic commenters were more emotional in their rhetoric than the mainstream commenters. Regardless of whether this is intentional or not, counterpublic-minded Facebook users' widespread use of emotional content may contribute to strengthen a sense of collective identity.

Despite moderation rules, *impolite tone* was the second most prevalent subcategory of strengthening a sense of identity. Comments using an impolite tone featured derogatory characteristics of political opponents and Muslims and included comments expressing the sentiment "go home where you belong". As shown in table 6.8, Islam-negative commenters were generally more impolite than Islam-positive commenters. The Danish commenters expressing a negative sentiment

[127] Even neutral comments were more often emotional than not (51%).

towards Islam were especially impolite: 18% of Danish negative comments had an impolite tone, while the corresponding figures were 11% and 9% in the Norwegian and Swedish comments, respectively. How can these results be understood from a counterpublic perspective?

As we saw in Chapter 2, the debate around Islam and related issues has been harsher in the Danish public sphere than in the Norwegian and Swedish public sphere. From this viewpoint, the findings relating to the impolite content subcategory reflect patterns from the countries' general public spheres. At the same time, some of the Danish comments seem to be more aggressive than what would be accepted in larger and more powerful Danish publics. This especially pertains to comments on the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*'s Facebook page, where commenters for instance verbally abused a Christian celebrity for marrying a Muslim. Looking at the immediate context of the Facebook users, no established news media published a post that cited insulting statements of this level without clearly distancing themselves from the statements. That said, most of the impolite comments expressed the sentiment that certain Muslims should "go home" or "go to where you come from", which were primarily directed against niqabis who opposed the face veil ban. A similar sentiment was typically not found in the news media's posts, but there were some exceptions in the Danish posts,[128] signalling that such rhetoric is less marginal in the Danish than in the Norwegian and Swedish public spheres. Thus, while the impolite comments in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections can be considered counterdiscursive, both based on the broader

[128] https://ekstrabladet.dk/nationen/saa-maa-du-forlade-landet-lille-ven-ikke-meget-stoette-til-ayesha-med-niqab/7180894
https://politiken.dk/indland/art6771321/Martin-Henriksen-Vi-kan-ikke-bruge-Fatimas-familie-til-noget?fbclid=IwAR1u-vzzFVAKvlaqbyObFMAOCYwCw-lMbjFMt2dFDzRnBy4h_ZXnBrB_WA4

sociopolitical and the immediate context, this is more uncertain when it comes to many of the impolite Danish comments.

With respect to the Islam-*positive* comments that had an impolite tone, these typically targeted far-right politicians' (lack of) intelligence, for instance by calling them idiots. As displayed in table 6.8, this type of comments was more common in the Danish comment sections than in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections. By engaging in such name-calling, these comments went beyond legitimate discourse in all the three contexts; none of established media's posts reported similar characteristics about a politician. Hence, these comments can reasonably be considered counterdiscursive. Thus, as we have also seen in the previous categories of counterpublic discourses, the Islam/Muslim-*sympathetic* counterpublic seems to have been were more active in the Danish comment sections than in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections.

The third most common subcategory of strengthening identity was *personal identification*, which featured comments using words like "we", "us", "our", or "ours" to signal a sense of personal belonging to a continent, nation, religion, organisation or other community. As indicated in table 6.8, this type of speech was represented in around 10% of comments in each country. Personal identification was slightly more common among Islam-positive than among Islam-negative comments in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections, while the opposite was true for the Danish comment sections.

Typically, the commenters in this subcategory expressed a sense of belonging to their nation, i.e. Norway/Sweden/Denmark, and occasionally also "the West". The focus on the nation was especially common among Islam-negative commenters, who contrasted e.g. "our democracy" and "our progressive values" with Islamic practices like wearing face veils and headscarves. Although such comments have different degrees of legitimacy in the three Scandinavian public spheres (see

Chapter 2), the immediate context of the Facebook commenters show that a similar sentiment as expressed in these comments can be found in both Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish posts.[129] As such, these comments generally seem to reflect mainstream rather than counter-discourse. Some commenters, however, did not only contrast “our democracy/values” with certain Islamic practices but also with the (alleged) intolerant character of Islam and Muslims altogether. These comments are less legitimate, and a similar discourse was, with a couple of Norwegian exceptions, only found in the Danish posts.

In contrast to the Islam-negative Facebook users, commenters positive towards Islam emphasised that “our values” are compassion, tolerance, and freedom of religion, which they more or less explicitly contrasted with the rhetoric of far right politicians and various (proposed) bans of certain Islamic practices. Some of the Islam-positive comments in this subcategory were also written by Muslims who expressed belonging to a larger Muslim community, for instance writing about “our religion”. Similar discourses were found in several of the established news media’s posts and also these comments can thus be considered mainstream.

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[129] See for instance
https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/XwQnJ7/haandhilse-debatten-religioese-muslimer-maa-legge-sine-hellige-prinsipper-hjemme?fbclid=IwAR0BPAGu2KJkEAFVY82IAcfs3Ui6tV6Uj-FUve_4hm3eBNc3yUWERh0Uwhc
https://www.minmote.no/?fbclid=IwAR2KnciXuIICf1bGR90Zmtb7LAQ4-lIB-YE5dqqWEiYYVN88y_dtRKqDrxw#!/artikkel/24438100/likestillingsorganisasjon-om-mote-hijab-vestlige-kvinner-som-dekker-seg-til-fordi-det-er-fashion-er-absurd
https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/VRMJg3/nej-forskolor-far-aldrig-tvinga-barn-att-ha-sloja?fbclid=IwAR3BvA4qKNluJFW8CLI20-sSB6B7WZGJC_kstBqftuwOQIQI2Gs4XfIYdWs
https://nyheter24.se/debatt/909794-kdu-burka-och-niqab-i-skolan-borde-forbjudas?fbclid=IwAR35eb8nEpWZGmsYMhaoauyvuRpllKtxSR8VJUEQIy0MLWuctM_bz4RZQMo
https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/norge-indfoerer-ogsaa-tildaekningsforbud-burka-og-niqab-bliver-forbudt-i-skolen?cid=soc_facebook_drnyheder_0x9jyzye&fbclid=IwAR3h9dstHWR5EAqDVc5qyIemprNI6TbNrJDFECGMqFcJ90Qjl69j0r_u0ZM

It is worth noting, however, that if one compares the explicitly counterdiscursive comments (i.e. comments deconstructing power relations) with all the other comments, there is a clear overweight of comments engaging in personal identification in the former group compared to the latter. While this is not shown in the table above, 24% of comments that deconstructed power relations expressed a sense of belonging to a (typically national) community, whereas the corresponding figure for comments that did not deconstruct power relations was 9%. As such, personal identification seems to be a more common characteristic among counterpublic commenters than among mainstream commenters. This is seen in comments criticising superordinate publics for being naïve towards Islam and Islamism and discriminatory towards "us" ethnic Norwegians/Swedes/Danes and non-Muslims. As a Danish commenter wrote when criticising the police force for being too lenient towards Muslims: "There are two sets of rules: one for Muslims and then another for the rest of us." As such, there seems to be a perception among some of the counterpublic-minded commenters that they are part of a sort of marginalised majority. Together with the use of emotional and impolite language, this may contribute to strengthen a sense of collective identity among these Facebook users.

We have now considered the three most common subcategories of strengthening a sense of collective identity. As illustrated in table 6.8, the remaining subcategories, *alarmism* and *political identification*, were relatively rare in the studied comment sections. Both subcategories were typically more common among Islam-sceptic than Islam-friendly comments, but the difference between positive and negative comments did not exceed 2 percentage points in any of the three countries.

When it comes to alarmism and differences between the countries, the Islam-positive Norwegian commenters virtually never engaged in alarmist rhetoric, while the corresponding figure among Swedish and Danish commenters was 2%. These

comments typically voiced concerns that Sweden/Denmark would strip Muslims of all their rights and potentially give them the same treatment as Jews had received in the 1930s and 40s. Also the Swedish and Danish Islam-negative comments were (marginally) more alarmist than the Norwegian ones.

It is worth adding that several Danish Islam-negative alarmist commenters often used alarmist rhetoric when discussing Sweden, e.g. by calling the country "Swedistan", referring to the country's (allegedly) failed immigration and integration policies. Furthermore, if we consider anti-*Islamist* comments, which are not included in the table above, the Swedish comments are substantially more alarmist than the Norwegian and Danish comments: 8% of Swedish anti-Islamist comments were coded as alarmist, while alarmist rhetoric was nearly nonexistent in the Norwegian and Danish anti-Islamist comments.

What do these findings tell us about the counterpublicity in the comment sections? A common trait shared by both anti- and pro-Islam alarmist commenters was the perception that there was a need for drastic change, which involved a more or less direct critique of the current status quo. For this reason, almost one third (32%) of alarmist comments deconstructed power relations. As such, a substantial proportion of these comments explicitly engaged in counterpublic discourse. There were, however, also alarmist comments that seem to have reflected content posted by the established news media. For instance, several Swedish posts described a dire need to deal with the spread of radical Islamism in the country,[130] a sentiment that was reinforced by alarmist commenters.

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[130] See for instance https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/samhalle/a/bK2bj5/sapo-far-6-000-tips-om-terror--varje-manad?fbclid=IwAR33Qk_iyZ6f72awBp0iMfb-tgRkDofVPCUZxn0XzipnxobcTiwLpxlqois https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/rapport-kontroversiell-islamism-vaxer-i-sverige?fbclid=IwAR3ru6WuzQrb2Tgxg_BYPqykDiiqCp7oL7oUtHgoROGtsN-Wh3m-p4CDaY0

As noted above, the final way in which counterpublic-minded commenters strengthened a sense of collective identity was by identifying with or indicating committed support for a political party or politician, i.e. *political identification.* This subcategory was marginal in the comment sections, and this applied to all three countries. Political identification was the least rare in the Swedish comment sections, where 3% of Islam-negative comments showed committed support for the radical right populist Sweden Democrats. Given the isolated and stigmatised role of the SD in mainstream Swedish public spheres until quite recently (see Chapter 2), these comments can arguably be considered counterdiscursive. Thus, although the subcategory was quite marginal, it is another indication of the anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim counterpublic being more prevalent in the Swedish comment sections than in the Norwegian and Danish comment sections.

Overall, the strengthening identity category reflected the findings from the two other characteristics of counterpublic discourses, deconstructing power relations and argumentative countering. In particular, this manifested in relation with the impolite tone subcategory. Although Danish commenters who are negative towards Islam were more often impolite than Islam-negative Norwegian and Swedish commenters, similar impolite language as found in the comment sections was identified in the Danish news media's posts, unlike in the Norwegian and Swedish posts. As such, many of the comments that this study has coded as impolite seem to be somewhat legitimate in the Danish context, whereas they appear illegitimate in the Norwegian and Swedish contexts. Thus, these comments are arguably mainstream in the Danish public sphere and counterdiscursive in the Norwegian and Swedish public spheres. While the Islam-negative Norwegian commenters were more often impolite than the Islam-negative Swedish commenters, the Swedish commenters more often engaged in alarmist rhetoric and (radical) political identification. Therefore, also within this category, the Swedish comment sections

seem to be permeated by Islam-negative counterpublic discourses to a larger extent than the other countries' comment sections.

When it comes to Islam/Muslim-sympathetic counterpublic discourses, this was, like with the anti-Islam counterpublic discourses, in particular found within the impolite subcategory. The Danish Islam-positive commenters stood out with 11% of their comments being impolite in a way that was not represented in established news media's posts, corresponding figures for Norwegian and Swedish commenters being 6% and 5%, respectively. Furthermore, unlike the Islam-positive Norwegian comments, there were signs of alarmist rhetoric among the Danish (and Swedish) Islam-positive comments. As such, also the findings from the strengthening identity category indicated that the Islam/Muslim-sympathetic counterpublic was more prevalent in the Danish comment sections than in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections.

As such, hypothesis 3,[131] which was theoretically informed by the corrective action perspective, generally has solid support after the three categories of counterpublic discourses have been considered. Contrary to expectations, though, the results do not support that the Islam/Muslim-sympathetic counterpublic was more active in the Norwegian than in the Swedish comment sections.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 6 has described that, in contrast to the established news media's posts, the Scandinavian commenters express a largely negative attitude towards Islam. In terms of sentiment, the Danish comment sections are the least negative towards Islam, while the Norwegian comment sections are the most negative. The Danish

[131] H3: Islam-critical counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, the least prevalent in the Danish comment sections, while the Norwegian comment sections will be found between these. Correspondingly, Islam-positive counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Danish comment sections and the least prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, with Norway again expected to be in a middle position.

commenters also appear to be the least inclined to engage in anti-Islam counterpublic discourses, while in the normally less Islam-critical Swedish and Norwegian public spheres, the comment sections are to a higher degree permeated by anti-Islam counterdiscursive comments. Furthermore, while pro-Islam counterpublic discourses seem to be relatively rare in the Swedish and Norwegian comment sections, they constitute a noticeable proportion of the Danish comments.

These findings are most clearly presented in relation with the deconstruction of power relations category, which firmly classified comments as counterdiscursive or mainstream: 7% of Swedish comments, 5% of Norwegian comments, and 3% of Danish comments targeted power relations from an Islam-sceptic viewpoint. Virtually no comments deconstructed power relations from a pro-Islam perspective in the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections, whereas 3% did so in the Danish comment sections. The researcher generally did not find it reasonable to decisively sort comments as either counterdiscursive or mainstream in the argumentative countering and strengthening identity categories, as several nuances, related both to the wider sociopolitical context and the immediate context, had to be taken into account. That said, the results from these two categories of counterpublic discourses seem to reflect the findings from the deconstruction of power relations category: there is a more active anti-Islam counterpublic sphere in the Swedish comment sections than in the Norwegian, and, particularly, the Danish comment sections, and there is a more prevalent *pro*-Islam counterpublic sphere in the Danish comment sections than in the other countries' comment sections.

As such, there is evidence that may suggest that the different national contexts incentivise commenters to engage in counterpublic discourses to different extents. In the public sphere marked to the greatest extent by hostility towards Islam and Muslims (Denmark), Islam-negative individuals may perceive that there is substantially less to "correct" for than in the more Islam-amicable public spheres of

Sweden and Norway. This is, for instance, indicated by the relatively high number of Swedish and Norwegian comments arguing for stricter laws to regulate wearing the burka and niqab, a practice that has already been banned in Denmark. The corrective action perspective, which has been applied to account for some of the results, is, however, not apt for explaining all the findings. For instance, while from the corrective action perspective, one may have expected the Swedish comment sections to be marked by a higher degree of negativity than the Norwegian comment sections (due to the more Islam-and immigrant amicable Swedish public discourse), this prediction did not find support in the results (see figure 6.1). This can perhaps partially be explained by the influence of the immediate context of the commenters, as the three countries' posts were found to be relatively similar in their depiction of Islam (see also Chapter 5).

We will now shift focus from the substance of the studied items to the popularity cues assigned to them by Facebook users.

Chapter 7: Popularity Cues

As this dissertation analyses sentiment towards Islam and Muslims on Facebook, considering popularity cues serves a potentially important purpose. As noted in Chapter 1, popularity cues are (mainly) used to assign relevance or endorsement to an online item. As such, they can provide additional insights on what type of content about Islam is popular and how this differs according to sentiment, theme, country, and other factors. Furthermore, given that popularity cues may affect audience's political perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018, p. 210), it is highly relevant to analyse what items are assigned relevance and endorsement and which items are not. It should be noted that during the spring of 2016 Facebook launched an expansion to the "Like" button to include also the reactions "Love", "Haha", "Wow", "Sad", and "Angry". These may make it clearer what attitude Facebook users try to express when using Facebook reactions and could be considered interesting as it "at least potentially allows for further insights into the emotional investments by media users into the news they engage with" (Larsson, 2018, p. 329). At the same time, it can be challenging to interpret their meaning. For instance, users may apply the "Haha" button both to laugh with and laugh at someone or something, and they may use the "Angry" button to show both support and opposition. In this chapter, these newer reactions were discussed if they stood out in some way, but the main focus was on the more established like, share, and comment functions.

The chapter is split into two parts. The first part focuses on the popularity cues assigned to the posts and the second focuses on the popularity cues assigned to the comments. In the first subsection of the chapter, it is considered how post format (i.e. video versus text) and how the post was presented (in terms of grammatical features) correlated with the number of popularity cues. Then, it is examined to what extent the different genres and themes generated engagement. The main

emphasis is however on comparing the countries, more specifically related to how posts with different sentiment to Islam is reacted to in the three cases. Similarly, the second part of the chapter considers the number of likes given to positive and negative comments to Islam in the three countries. It also compares the number of popularity cues assigned to counterpublic comments and mainstream comments.

Popularity Cues and Posts

Format and presentation

While we shall see that content more specifically related to Islam may have impacted the number of popularity cues posts received, also the format and presentation of the posts may have played a role. There were only 6 among the total number of posts (N=602) that received more than 1000 shares, and four of these were video posts (three of which were from TV or radio debates and one that was a skit performed by a comedian). This was even though only one ninth of the posts were video items; most posts featured a picture, a headline, a brief description of a story, and a link to an article on the news media's website. As such, the more visual character of the video items, which has been shown in studies of visual communication to both increase audience's attention towards a message (Graber, 1990) and contribute to forming political opinions (Maurer & Reinemann, 2015), may have made them stand out from the pack.

Looking at the median value, however, video posts received fewer interactions than non-video posts did. While video posts received a median number of 25 shares, 133 comments, and 143 likes, the corresponding figures for non-video posts were 28, 206.5, and 152. A possible explanation is that all the posts contained pictures, which similarly to the videos may have contained vivid depictions of a story. Since no in-depth analysis was made of the pictures used by the outlets, it is difficult to say something certain about how the visual characteristics influenced the popularity cues. It is worth noting that the only form of interaction that video posts received more of than non-video posts was "Love", perhaps suggesting that video posts led

to Facebook users having more sympathetic feelings for the case or individual(s) in focus.

Another important aspect having to do with the type of post, was that 46 of the 602 posts were accompanied by a question where the news outlets asked the Facebook users directly what their opinion was on the issue described in the post, in line with social media logic (Haim et al., 2019). For example, Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* in one of its posts wrote: "German minister serves blood sausage for conference about Islam. Is that okay?", before linking to an article on its website.[132] Similarly, Danish tabloid *B.T*. in a post asked its audience: "No more fried pork as national dish due to consideration for Muslims?".[133] This strategy of using engaging features like question marks, which was mainly used by the Danish news media, seems to have boosted the number of interactions considerably. Posts featuring such questions received a median number of 43 shares, 543.5 comments, and 336.5 likes. Other posts received a median number of 26 shares, 192 comments, and 143.5 likes. As such, there were more factors than simply how Islam was described that influenced the number of interactions with the posts. I have here mentioned two: type of post (i.e. whether it was a video post or had another format) and presentation of the post (i.e. whether the post was accompanied by a question that served to stimulate the number of interactions).

Genres

As we saw in chapter 5, as many as 78% of the posts were news items, while 21% were debate posts (see table 5.2). As was briefly noted then, posting debate items about Islam did not lead to increased engagement from the Facebook users. Rather, the results showed that news items about Islam received more interactions of every

[132] https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/tysk-minister-serverer-blodpoelse-til-islam-konference/7425830?fbclid=IwAR0q_OHyglS8rIvC2di1vusEJ2J9h7HI3DM-gIGT_YbDFEm6zk-UzTr3CZM

[133] https://www.bt.dk/samfund/slut-med-stegt-flaesk-som-nationalret

kind compared to debate items about Islam. While news items received a median number of 32 shares, 239 comments, and 158 likes, the corresponding figures for debate items were 19, 112.5, and 123.

The finding is interesting given that the debate genre more typically facilitates the expression of a clear opinion, which one could expect might trigger interaction with a post. At the same time, news factors (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) such as unexpectedness and negativity may have increased the newsworthiness of news items, prompting users to like and share them (Weber, 2014). The relatively high median number of "Angry" reactions to news items (42.5) compared to debate items (5) that was found in this study is perhaps an indication of this. Another, simpler (potential) explanation is that the news outlets sometimes publish debate items only on their Facebook debate page, which tends to be followed by fewer users than the main page where they usually post the news items.

Themes

Studies of news factors have shown that stories evoking negative emotions may increase sharing and commenting activity among the audience (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015; Weber, 2014). In the extension of this, Larsson (2018) in his study of newer popularity cues on Facebook showed that Angry reactions seem to increase the willingness to share or comment on the posts reacted upon (whereas the opposite is true for the typically more positive Love, Wow, and Haha reactions). From this perspective, it was expected that especially posts about Islamism, Jihadism, and war would be shared extensively. How do these insights fit with the responses to the most popular themes in the Scandinavian news outlets' posts? The following table shows the median number of popularity cues assigned to posts discussing the five most prominent themes.

Table 7.1: Median number of Facebook interactions—comparison of the 5 most common themes in the posts (n=377)[134]

Popularity cues	**Islamism/ Jihadism/war**	**Burka/niqab**	**Discrimination/ racism**	**Hijab**	**Spirituality/ rituals/holidays**
Shares	29	35	21	25	29.5
Comments	174	408	162	136	338.5
Likes	81	392	81.5	184	232.5
"Angry"	85	37	22.5	22	43
"Sad"	4	4	6.5	4	7
"Love"	1	37	3	7	11.5
"Haha"	6	30	12	5	28
"Wow"	5	7	4	4	2.5

As demonstrated in table 7.1, the Islamism/Jihadism/war category stood out with a high median number of Angry reactions. Still, it was only the third most shared theme among the top five most prevalent themes in the news media's posts. Posts about the burka and niqab received the highest number of shares, likes, and comments. While this is not shown in the table, posts describing the implementation of laws prohibiting face-covering clothing in Denmark and Norway received several thousand interactions—mostly likes—in all three countries, as Swedish outlets also posted about the bans. Posts that focused on discrimination and racism against Muslims, however, were shared relatively rarely, which is in line with research that has found that sad content is shared to a lower extent than content that evokes high-arousal positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety) emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Posts about the hijab were only the fourth most shared out of the five most prominent themes in the Facebook posts. This theme category still received the second highest median number of likes, although not nearly as many as posts about face-covering clothing did. Posts about spirituality, rituals, and holidays were only beaten by posts about the burka and

[134] Number of posts about the five most prominent themes.

niqab in terms of the shares, comments, and likes they received, suggesting that these posts were assigned high relevance and endorsement by Facebook users (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018).

Sentiment towards Islam

We saw in the previous chapter that Facebook users' comments were largely negative towards Islam. This was expected, as the most active individuals in online arenas, as well as those who discuss in news outlets' online comment sections, have been noted to be more critical of immigration than the general population (Enjolras et al., 2013). Furthermore, given how anti-Islamic actors like radical right populist parties and alternative right-wing media have been shown to be highly successful in creating engagement online, it was hypothesised that:

H4a: Negative posts about Islam will receive many more popularity cues than positive posts will. The hypothesis is considered to have strong support if negative posts have 1.5+ times as many shares and likes as positive posts do.

The following table confirms the hypothesis, as the median number of shares and likes for negative compared to positive posts was above 1.5 times higher.

Table 7.2: Median number of Facebook interactions with negative, positive, neutral, and negatively loaded posts about Islam (N=602)

Popularity cues	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negatively loaded
Shares	39	22	25	30.5
Comments	306	184	209.5	143
Likes	290	143	122.5	89
"Angry"	43	16	12	89
"Sad"	6	3	2.5	4
"Love"	9	10	3	1
"Haha"	15	15	15	6
"Wow"	5	4	5	6

While the median number of shares for negative posts about Islam was 39, the number was only 22 for positive posts. Furthermore, posts that focused on negatively loaded themes, such as Islamism/Jihadism/war, honour culture, and crime (but did not involve a negative coverage of Islam or Muslims in general), also received a relatively high median number of shares (30.5), indicating that (both more and less explicitly) negative posts were assigned higher relevance by the users than positive and neutral posts were. The negative posts were also liked much more often than the other categories of posts, signalling a higher endorsement of content that portrays Islam and/or Muslims negatively. Posts with negatively laden themes, on the other hand, received the lowest endorsement, which is understandable due to these posts focusing on topics such as Jihadism and honour culture.

The newer forms of Facebook reactions were typically more evenly spread on the different categories. Except for the "Angry" reaction, they were also relatively rarely used, in line with general reaction patterns on Facebook (Larsson, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the negatively loaded category, which featured posts about troubling themes, typically received the highest number of "Angry" reactions. As demonstrated by table 7.2, negative posts also received substantially more "Angry" reactions than positive and neutral posts did. On the one hand, this could indicate that users were angry because they thought that the negative content was unjustified, or, on the other hand, that they were angry because they supported negative content describing something provoking, e.g. pre-school employees agreeing to force children to wear the hijab. The latter explanation seems more plausible given the mainly negative attitudes expressed in the comment sections and the fact that negative posts were shared and liked more often than positive and neutral posts.

Comparing the countries

This subsection focuses on the relative popularity of negative versus positive items in the three countries, meaning the absolute number of popularity cues is not

highlighted. Still, it is worth noting that there were substantial differences in relation to the number of popularity cues received by the three countries' posts. Danish posts were typically shared more than three times as often as Norwegian posts, liked more than four times as often as Norwegian posts and commented on more than twice as often as Swedish posts. Moreover, Danish posts typically received the most of all newer forms of reactions and stood out particularly with high numbers of "Angry", "Love", and "Haha" reactions. It can also be added that the median number of "Angry" reactions was only 4 in the Norwegian posts, whereas it was 30.5 and 57 in the Swedish and Danish posts, potentially indicating that Facebook users from Sweden and Denmark were angrier when engaging with the Facebook posts.

When it comes to comparing the number of interactions with negative and positive posts in the three cases, the study hypothesised that:

> H4b: In line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative posts will receive the highest number of likes and shares relative to the number of likes and shares received by Islam-positive posts, while Danish Islam-negative items will receive the lowest number of likes and shares relative to the likes and shares received by Islam-positive items. Norway will be found between the two in terms of the ratio of popularity cues on negative and positive items.

Table 7.3: Median number of Facebook interactions with negative and positive posts about Islam—comparison of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish posts (n=386)[135]

	Norway		**Sweden**		**Denmark**	
Popularity cues	**Neg. posts**	**Pos. posts**	**Neg. posts**	**Pos. posts**	**Neg. posts**	**Pos. posts**
Shares	29	6	47	19	40	47
Comments	221	37.5	169	87	489	440
Likes	242	84.5	235	76	328	330.5
“Angry”	20	2	34	16	83	32.5
“Sad”	3	1	4	2	11	4
“Love”	12	4	4	3	21	32
“Haha”	7	5	5	12	40	28.5
“Wow”	4	1	4	3	7	7

As depicted in table 7.3, while the Danish posts undoubtedly generated the most Facebook interactions in total, these tended to be more evenly distributed between negative and positive posts than in the Norwegian and Swedish cases, where interactions were largely concentrated on the negative posts. As such, the analysis of the attitudes expressed in the comments, which found that for every positive comment in each country there were 2.5 negative comments in the Norwegian case, 1.9 negative comments in the Swedish case, and 1.5 negative comments in the Danish case (see subsection Sentiment in Chapter 6), was generally mirrored in Facebook users’ assigning of popularity cues. For instance, while negative Norwegian posts received a median number of 29 shares, positive Norwegian posts received a median number of 6 shares. Similarly, the corresponding figures in the Swedish case were 47 and 19 shares. The Danish posts stood out as the negative posts typically received 7 *fewer* shares than the positive posts did.

Support for hypothesis 4b was substantial in the sense that Danish Facebook users, once again, proved to be less negative to Islam, and that both Norwegian and

[135] Only posts that covered Islam negatively or positively are considered here. Neutral and negatively loaded posts are thus not included.

Swedish outlets had clearly more interactions on their negative posts relative to their positive posts. Still, Norway was once again found to be more negative than Sweden in terms of ratio between negative and positive items, at least when it comes to the number of shares, which went against expectations. While negative Norwegian posts received 4.8 shares and 2.9 likes for every share and like that positive Norwegian posts received, the corresponding figures were 2.5 and 3.1 in the Swedish case. Overall, then, only partial support was found for hypothesis 4b.

Addressing some of the newer forms of Facebook reactions, these seemed to support the pattern found in the more established interaction forms represented by shares and likes. For instance, as depicted in table 7.3, while the Norwegian outlets' Islam-negative posts received more Love reactions than their Islam-positive posts did, the opposite was true for the Danish outlets.[136] Other reactions, such as Angry and Haha, are more difficult to discern whether are mostly used to express support or opposition. For instance, the Haha Reaction was only in the Swedish case used more often when responding to positive posts, which may indicate either ridicule or support of such content. Given the relatively negative comments and the fact that a vast majority of Swedish shares and likes were used when responding to stories describing Islam negatively, it is, however, more likely that they were used with the purpose of laughing at, rather than laughing with, Islam-sympathetic actors and cases. For example, a post where a Swedish woman said she was "pissed off" because she considered it culturally insensitive that costume stores were selling burka costumes for Halloween[137] received 754 Haha reactions.

While not shown in the previous table, looking closer at the top ten most popular posts from each country in terms of likes plus shares shows that seven of the Danish

[136] The Love reaction was rarely used in the Swedish case.
[137] https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/ngxdrn/danielle-25-om-maskeraddrakten-det-gor-mig-forbannad?fbclid=IwAR3ABaBk__OOW1eqRAaHmP_-MnIwiMEjTIZQ3RnMwI67Z4HzdFXwe9GWtCA

posts portray Islam positively, while three posts portray Islam negatively. Among the top 10 posts, the three most popular ones are positive. The most popular Danish post, receiving 8000 likes and 2707 shares, was a video excerpt from a televised debate where a private citizen criticised anti-Islamic politicians for their harsh language and tone around Islam. The second most popular item was a post with an associated article describing that the organisation Muslims for Peace (*Muslimer For Fred*) for the seventh year in a row would pick up garbage in the City Hall Square of Copenhagen after the 2018 New Year's Eve celebration.[138] The third most popular post was a video excerpt from a radio studio where the guest, Preben Wilhjelm, a previous communist/socialist member of Parliament, called the ban of face-covering clothing "ridiculous".

Unlike in the Danish case, where most of the highly liked and shared posts covered Islam positively, five out of the ten most popular Swedish posts depicted Islam negatively, while only one post covered Islam positively. The rest of the most popular posts either focused on negatively loaded themes or covered Islam neutrally. Interestingly, all three of the most popular Swedish posts focused on the burka and niqab. The most popular post (and its associated article), which received 5900 likes and 692 shares, described artist Tommy Körberg's views on face veils. Körberg argued that wearing this clothing amounts to "pure harassment of women" and urged people to adapt to the Swedish way of life.[139] The second most popular Swedish post and associated article described that Norway had passed a ban on face-covering clothing in teaching situations,[140] while the third most popular post (a

[138] https://nyheder.tv2.dk/lokalt/2018-12-31-muslimer-tager-skraldet-for-syvende-aar-i-traek
[139] https://www.aftonbladet.se/nojesbladet/a/gPlr05/tommy-korberg-tack-inte-ansiktet?fbclid=IwAR0FKkNuq4ldulSJxVhrRfrQWZAar6b08pVdpGpzLH2nkq7i08x1oDIZIMk
[140] https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/yvroza/nej-till-burka-och-niqab-i-norska-klassrum?fbclid=IwAR3RsxvNBa8mnPnRJbnJpy1T9MQsQeTTSLDxovaq8TTM9FV84BdD8fYbOdY

video from a news show) described that Denmark had passed a ban on face-covering clothing.[141] All these three posts were coded as depicting Islam negatively.

Among the ten most popular Norwegian posts, there were four that covered Islam negatively, three that covered Islam positively, two negatively loaded posts and one neutral post. Again, the burka and niqab was a central focus in the most liked plus shared posts. The most popular post was, however, a video skit performed by comedian Robert Stoltenberg. In the skit, Stoltenberg played an imam who through simultaneously having all kinds of jobs in addition to his job as an imam gave a priest highly peculiar advice on how to attract people to his church. The post received 2900 likes and 3648 shares. The second and third most popular items were both posts with associated articles that announced that the Norwegian Parliament had voted to ban face-covering clothing in teaching situations.[142]

Popularity Cues and Comments

We now turn our attention from popularity cues assigned to the news outlets' posts to popularity cues assigned to the comments. Since the comment sections reach fewer readers than the established news media's posts, the number of popularity cues were generally lower. In fact, only the "like" had a median value of more than 0 when considering all the comments. The focus in this part of the chapter is therefore on the more institutionalised like button.

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[141] https://www.tv4play.se/program/nyhetsmorgon/10737308?utm_medium=organic_post&utm_source=facebook.com&linkId=54995347&fbclid=IwAR1zYD_HUqNRHhQ0nUcw7NkQYyH4XNLbfuZUL3nii7vw4wUYQ1P2quI6b7g

[142] https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/7lwanK/naa-blir-det-forbudt-aa-gaa-med-nikab-og-burka-paa-norske-skoler?fbclid=IwAR3kwh0fkG_jIrkXCymKT9TaFf5xK5MWOHDV6qjY9ar2qDT7wl5jisDIKyA
https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/na-blir-det-forbudt-med-nikab-og-burka-pa-norske-skoler/69873756?fbclid=IwAR2JwyOH2ZYDj5ExcRXBC4-4s1eE-qWOc1NcMeoubqyLPewch0XUM6v1Xqc

Sentiment—comparing the countries

We have seen that the established news media's posts about Islam were met differently with respect to popularity cues in the three countries: while likes and shares were mostly given to negative posts about Islam in the Norwegian and Swedish cases, Danish negative and positive posts received more equal numbers of these popularity cues (see table 7.3). It was assumed that this also would be the case with the comments:

H4c: In line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative comments will receive the highest number of likes relative to the number of likes received by Islam-positive comments, while Danish Islam-negative comments will receive the lowest number of likes relative to the likes received by Islam-positive comments. Norway will be found between the two in terms of the ratio of likes on negative and positive comments.

Table 7.4: Median number of likes given to comments expressing different sentiment towards Islam (N=6797)

	Norway	**Sweden**	**Denmark**	**Total**
Negative	6	4	3	4
Positive	7	4	3	4
Neutral	3	3	1	2
Anti-Islamist	3	4	4	3

As shown in table 7.4, however, comments expressing negative and positive sentiment towards Islam were endorsed to the same extent, except for a slight difference in the Norwegian comments, where actually the positive comments received more likes than the negative comments. This was surprising given the previously presented results showing both that the Norwegian and Swedish Facebook users wrote many more negative than positive comments (see figure 6.1), and that they overwhelmingly endorsed and assigned relevance to negative posts over positive posts (see table 7.3). The number of likes given to the Danish

comments were nonetheless largely in line with the even distribution of likes and shares that the Danish posts received (see table 7.3). Overall, though, hypothesis 4c was rejected.

A possible explanation is that there were more Islam-sympathetic than Islam-critical "lurkers", i.e. people who read and "liked" the comments but did not comment or react to the post. Liking a comment will compared to commenting on and liking a post be less visible to one's Facebook friends. Thus, such activity is more discreet and comfortable if people want to stay apolitical within their friend network (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). There is, however, no obvious reason why this should influence those positively inclined to Islam or Muslims more than those who are sceptical of Islam or Muslims. The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) might be relevant here: some individuals may not want to express opinions or openly endorse content that they perceive to deviate from the typical discourse in the comment sections of mainstream news outlets' Facebook pages—which (especially in the cases of Norway and Sweden) is dominated by Islam-critical opinions to a high extent. This might lead those with sympathetic views to Islam or Muslims to refrain from taking online action that may have a relatively high threshold, such as posting a comment, and correspondingly leading to them settling with liking a comment published by someone else instead. From another view, it may just be that those critical of Islam, which as we have seen have been especially active in reacting to posts and writing comments in the Norwegian and Swedish cases, may consider liking comments a less important activity.

It is worth noting that the results indicated that taking a clear stance on Islam, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, led to higher endorsement from readers than in the case of neutral or anti-Islamist comments, albeit the difference was relatively small. As can be seen in table 7.4, negative and positive comments received a median number of 4 likes, while the corresponding figures for neutral and

anti-Islamist comments were 2 and 3. This gap was most visible in the Norwegian case, where the negative and positive comments typically received 6 and 7 likes, respectively, while neutral and anti-Islamist comments typically received 3 and 4 likes.

Counterpublic discourses

As we have just seen, the comments that took a clear stance on Islam, both in the form of positive and negative comments, were the most endorsed in terms of the number of likes they received (see table 7.4). In this subsection, we consider whether this also was the case with comments that challenged the larger public sphere, i.e. engaged in counterpublic discourse. We here focus on the comments that deconstructed power relations, because these comments explicitly criticised superordinate publics within their national public sphere, indicating a clear feeling of marginalisation or exclusion from these publics on the part of the commenter. It was predicted that:

> H4d: In line with viewing comment sections as providing substantial affordances for counterpublic-minded individuals to challenge mainstream-minded individuals, counterdiscursive comments will receive a higher number of likes than mainstream comments will. Particularly comments engaging in anti-Islam counterpublic discourse will receive many likes.

Table 7.5: Median number of likes—comparison of comments deconstructing power relations from an anti-Islam/anti-Islamist viewpoint, comments deconstructing power relations from a pro-Islam viewpoint, and other comments (N=6797)

	Anti-Islam/anti-Islamist deconstruction of power relations	**Pro-Islam deconstruction of power relations**	**Other comments**
Likes	7	7	3

As depicted in table 7.5, the results indicate that comments engaging in counterpublic discourses around Islam were indeed endorsed to a higher degree

than other comments. A possible explanation for this is that counterpublic-minded commenters, who otherwise feel marginalised, may see more of a benefit in using social media platforms such as Facebook to spread their ideology. Since popularity cues may influence the way people perceive content (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018), liking content can function both to bolster support from individuals that already endorse counterpublic ideas, as well as to influence the opinion of mainstream-oriented individuals.

Because we have previously seen that there were more Islam-negative comments than there were Islam-positive comments, both in terms of sentiment (see figure 6.1) and in the manifestation of counterpublic discourses (see table 6.3), one might have expected that Facebook users with negative attitudes would be more active in liking such content than positive commenters would. Surprisingly, the pro-Islam counterdiscursive comments and Islam-negative counterdiscursive comments were endorsed to an equal extent. Thus, only the first part of the hypothesis was supported (i.e. counterdiscursive comments will be endorsed through a higher number of likes than mainstream comments will). The latter part of the hypothesis (i.e. particularly comments engaging in anti-Islam counterpublic discourse will receive many likes) was rejected.

Chapter Summary

While the popularity cues assigned to the mainstream news outlets' posts point to relatively high activity among those negative towards Islam in the Norwegian and Swedish cases, Danish positive and negative posts received quite equal numbers of popularity cues. In particular, Norwegian posts that covered Islam negatively stood out with a high number of likes and shares (relative to the numbers generated by positive posts). As such, the assigned endorsement and relevance of posts through popularity cues largely reflected the sentiment in the comments described in Chapter 6: the Norwegian Facebook users were the most negative, followed by the Swedish ones, while the Danish ones were the least negative. Surprisingly, when it

comes to the number of likes given to comments, negative content about Islam did not tend to generate more likes than positive content did in any of the three countries.

In line with expectations of the strong incentive for counterpublic-minded individuals to use the comment sections not only to write but also to like content to sway opinions of mainstream audiences, both pro-Islam counterpublic discursive and anti-Islam counterpublic discursive comments were liked to a higher extent than mainstream comments. Surprisingly, pro-Islam counterpublic-minded Facebook users were equally active as anti-Islam counterpublic-minded Facebook users in assigning endorsement through the number of likes to comments that explicitly engaged in counterpublic discourses.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation has had two overarching objectives: First, the dissertation has sought to contribute to existing literature on Scandinavian discourse on Islam by comparing Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish content on Facebook, a central arena for news as well as public debate. Second, it has aimed to contribute to existing literature on counterpublics by analysing to what extent (both Islam-sceptic and Islam-sympathetic) counterpublic discourses appear in mainstream news outlets' comment sections on Facebook. This concluding chapter summarises the main findings and discusses their wider implications. It also describes some limitations of the study and suggests potential directions for future research.

Research question 1 of the dissertation asked: To what extent do Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook posts and their associated articles about Islam differ (with respect to genre, theme, sources, and sentiment), and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained? It was hypothesised that Danish posts (and their associated article texts) would cover Islam more negatively than Norwegian and Swedish posts (and their associated article texts) would, and that the Norwegian items would be more negative than the Swedish items, albeit that the difference would be marginal.

In light of the wider sociopolitical context outlined in Chapter 2, it was surprising to find that the three Scandinavian countries' Facebook posts generally covered Islam positively (or had an even mix of positive and negative items, depending on the emphasis one puts on what I called "negatively loaded" posts). In other words, the relatively striking differences between the three countries' public, political, and media discourse on Islam (and related topics such as immigration and integration), which are typically accepted in public debate and existing research, was not confirmed in this study's analysis of established news media's Facebook posts. This

might indicate that the differences between the Scandinavian public spheres around this issue are not as significant as the existing literature has indicated.

At the same time, there has been a substantial redefinition of the spheres of opinion (Hallin, 1986) in the Swedish public sphere in recent years, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis. That the Swedish news media's Facebook posts were not clearly more positive in their depiction of Islam than the Norwegian and Danish news media's posts were, can perhaps best be understood in light of this development. Thus, the fact that this study focused on data from 2018 may to some extent explain why the results diverge from comparative studies that have based their analysis on data from before 2015.

Furthermore, although the results show a relatively small difference between the countries' Facebook posts in terms of sentiment towards Islam, it is worth remarking that the Danish tabloids' depiction of Islam and Muslims stand out as considerably more negative, both quantitively and qualitatively, than the Norwegian and Swedish tabloids' coverage. As such, also the findings in this study suggest that some Danish news media cover Islam and Muslims more negatively than Norwegian and Swedish news media do, albeit this only applies to the Danish tabloids' coverage.

Research question 2 asked: to what extent do comments on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages differ with respect to the sentiment they express towards Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained? Hypothesis 2 predicted that "All countries' comment sections will have more negative than positive comments about Islam. In line with the corrective action perspective, the Swedish comment sections will have the highest number of negative comments compared to positive comments, the Danish comment sections will have the lowest number of negative compared to positive comments, and the Norwegian comment sections will be found between the Swedish and Danish ones".

The results showed that the commenters were largely negative towards Islam, in all three countries: while 45% of the studied comments were found to be negative, 27% were positive. As such, the first part of hypothesis 2 was confirmed. The second part of hypothesis 2, however, was rejected: although it was correctly predicted that the Danish comments would be the least negative towards Islam, the Norwegian comments were, against expectations, more negative than the Swedish comments. The corrective action perspective does therefore not seem useful in relation with these particular results. At the same time, the general negative sentiment towards Islam identified in the comments, which displays a contrast to the established news media's mainly positive posts, is perhaps an indication of commenters being motivated to correct for what they considered to be an overly Islam-positive media discourse. Thus, the findings illustrate a need to go beyond mainstream actors' online communication to grasp how Islam (and other topics on the political agenda) is discussed in the online realm. This was also clearly indicated in relation with research question 3.

Research question 3 asked: To what extent are comment sections on Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish news outlets' Facebook pages permeated by counterpublic discourses around Islam, and how can differences, or the lack of such, be explained? Theoretically informed by the corrective action perspective, hypothesis 3 predicted that "Islam-critical counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, the least prevalent in the Danish comment sections, while the Norwegian comment sections will be found between these. Correspondingly, it is predicted that Islam-*positive* counterpublic discourses will be most prevalent in the Danish comment sections and the least prevalent in the Swedish comment sections, with Norway again expected to be in a middle position." The results showed that 7% of Swedish comments, 5% of Norwegian comments, and 3% of Danish comments deconstructed power relations from an anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim perspective. While comments deconstructing power relations from a pro-Islam/pro-

Muslim perspective were virtually absent from the Norwegian and Swedish comment sections, a noticeable, yet small, portion of Danish comments (3%) was found within this category. As such, hypothesis 3 was largely confirmed, with the exception that the Norwegian comment sections did not feature a more active pro/Islam/pro-Muslim counterpublic than the Swedish comment sections.

While 7%, 5%, and 3% may be considered a quite low permeation of counterpublic discourses, it should be kept in mind that these figures only included comments where Facebook users voiced an *explicit perception* of marginalisation or exclusion. These comments are of high interest from a counterpublic perspective because they are unmistakably counterdiscursive in character: they directly target superordinate publics, such as the mainstream media, the political establishment, and the criminal justice system. Thus, they could be resolutely classified as counterdiscursive and were central in answering research question 3.

At the same time, it is not sufficient to only consider those who explicitly express a sense of marginalisation or exclusion as an expression of counterpublic discourse. Within the subcategories of argumentative countering and strengthening identity, we find other comments that also reasonably may be viewed as counterdiscursive, but where the commenter did not necessarily[143] explicitly voice a sense of marginalisation or exclusion from more powerful public spheres. Within the argumentative countering category, this applies to for instance comments legitimising harassment of Muslims and political opponents, comments denouncing converts to Islam as insane and idiotic, comments labelling others as fascists and Nazis, and comments arguing for a complete ban of Muslim immigration. Similarly, within the strengthening identity category, several comments that used an impolite

[143] Because a comment could engage in several types of counterpublic discursive patterns, it is, however, possible that these commenters both targeted power relations, engaged in argumentative countering, and strengthened a sense of collective identity in the same comment.

tone, engaged in alarmist rhetoric, and identified with a (previously deviant) political party can be considered to have challenged the bounds of mainstream discourse.

As we saw in Chapter 6, the results from the argumentative countering and strengthening identity categories largely reflected the findings from the deconstructing power relations category: anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim counterpublic comments were represented to the highest extent in the country historically marked by a large sphere of consensus around Islam and immigration (Sweden) and to the lowest extent in the country marked by a small sphere of consensus around Islam and immigration (Denmark). The country whose spheres of opinion around Islam and immigration have been in a middle position (Norway), was found between Sweden and Denmark in terms of the prevalence of anti-Islamist/anti-Islam/anti-Muslim counterdiscursive comments. Moreover, the country whose general public sphere to the largest extent has been marked by anti-Islam discourse (Denmark), had the highest proportion of comments engaging in counterpublic discursive patterns from an Islam/Muslim-sympathetic viewpoint.

From this perspective, the study indicates that citizens are particularly incentivised to use the online realm to engage in counterpublic discourses in national contexts where they have reason to feel that there is a lot to "correct" for. If established news media and political actors do not adequately represent viewpoints held by a substantial proportion of citizens, it may prompt these citizens to take advantage of online platforms to disseminate alternative ideas and perspectives. An implication of this is that it is crucial to evaluate the wider sociopolitical context in which counterpublics operate to understand their prevalence in the public sphere.

At the same time, this study highlights the relevance of considering the *immediate* context of counterpublics—in addition to the wider sociopolitical context. As explained by Toepfl & Piwoni (2015), comment sections allow counterpublic-minded individuals to formulate their ideas in proximity to mainstream publics, where they

may be more influential than in more secluded online spaces. Furthermore, this study has shown how an immediate context may differ from (certain assumptions about) a broader sociopolitical context (which is illustrated by the rejection of hypothesis 1), thereby influencing what can be considered mainstream and counterdiscursive speech around a given topic.

The fourth, and final, research question asked: to what extent do popularity cues correlate with different Facebook posts and comments about Islam, and how can correlations, or the lack of such, be explained? Several hypotheses were formulated in relation with this research question. Hypothesis 4a predicted that negative posts about Islam would receive many more popularity cues than positive posts. This hypothesis was confirmed, as posts that depicted Islam negatively received more than 1.5 times the number of shares and likes as posts that covered Islam positively. In other words, the generally Islam-negative attitude that the Facebook users displayed in the comments was also reflected in their assigning of endorsement and relevance through popularity cues to the news media's posts.

Hypothesis 4b also focused on popularity cues assigned to the established media's Facebook posts and predicted that, "In line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative posts will receive the highest number of likes and shares relative to the number of likes and shares received by Islam-positive posts, while Danish Islam-negative items will receive the lowest number of likes and shares relative to the likes and shares received by Islam-positive items. Norway will be found between the two in terms of the ratio of popularity cues on negative and positive items." Support for hypothesis 4b was considerable in the sense that Danish Facebook users, once again, proved to be less negative towards Islam, and that both Norwegian and Swedish outlets had clearly more interactions on their negative posts relative to their positive posts. Still, Norway was once again found to be more negative than Sweden in terms of ratio between negative and positive

items, at least in terms of the number of shares, which went against expectations. Overall, then, only partial support was found for hypothesis 4b.

The final hypotheses, 4c and 4d, focused on popularity cues assigned to the comments. 4c predicted that, in line with the corrective action perspective, Swedish Islam-negative comments would receive the highest number of likes relative to the number of likes received by Islam-positive comments, while Danish Islam-negative comments would receive the lowest number of likes relative to the likes received by Islam-positive comments. It was projected that Norway would be found between the two in terms of the ratio of likes on negative and positive comments. Contrary to expectations, Islam-negative and Islam-positive comments received an equal number of likes,[144] and there were only marginal differences between the countries. As such, hypothesis 4c was rejected.

Hypothesis 4d focused on the popularity cues assigned to explicitly counterdiscursive comments versus other comments and projected that, "In line with viewing comment sections as providing substantial affordances for counterpublic-minded individuals to challenge mainstream-minded individuals, counterdiscursive comments will receive a higher number of likes than mainstream comments will. Particularly comments engaging in anti-Islam counterpublic discourse will receive many likes." The results confirmed the first part of hypothesis 4d, as comments that deconstructed power relations tended to receive more than twice as many likes as other comments. Against expectations, pro-Islam comments that deconstructed power relations received just as many likes as anti-Islam comments that deconstructed power relations. As such, the latter part of hypothesis 4d was rejected.

[144] Except for in the Norwegian comment sections, where positive comments received a slightly higher median number of likes than negative comments did.

We have now summarised and discussed some of the main findings in this study. What are some other wider implications of this dissertation's findings for research on counterpublics? Addressing the theoretical literature on counterpublics, the results indicate a gap from Frasers' (1990) influential description of subaltern counterpublics, constituted by members of historically subordinated social groups: "women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). In light of the finding of a prominent anti-Islam counterpublic sphere operating in the comment sections, it is worth reflecting on the implications that the existence of right-wing/anti-immigrant/anti-Islam collectives have for the literature on counterpublics, which has generally been marked by a normative focus on progressive and left-wing collectives.

Luckily, significant contributions have already been made to account for such phenomena. A useful approach that has been highlighted in this dissertation is the relational perspective. That is, rather than focusing on exclusion per se, scholars have emphasised the *perception* of exclusion from the wider public sphere (Asen, 2000; Brouwer, 2006; Warner, 2002). This is most clearly seen in this study in relation to the deconstructing power relations category. This opens for the potential of viewing groups from the far-left to the far-right to be engaging in counterpublic discourses, as long as these consider themselves as correctives to an excluding mainstream public sphere (Neumayer, 2013). Maintaining that counterpublics are self-perceived correctives that may emanate from any ideology, rather than assuming that they always have a progressive agenda, may thus be important to broaden the scope of research on counterpublics.

Fraser (1990) herself specifies that counterpublics are not "necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization" (p. 67). While she

seemingly does not have radical right-wing collectives in mind (as she refers to women, workers, peoples of colour, and LGBTQ people), she notes that “insofar as subaltern counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space” (p. 67). As this study has indicated, right-wing counterpublic-minded individuals may, similarly to progressive collectives, contribute to expanding discursive space (at least for like-minded individuals). This has been particularly true after the advent of Web 2.0, marked by the interactive potential of new media and online technologies. Promisingly, more scholarly attention has been paid to far-right counterpublics in recent years (see Cammaerts, 2009; Holm, 2019; Kaiser & Rauchleisch, 2019; Neumayer, 2013; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018; Törnberg & Wahlström, 2018). Given the continued success of far-right parties and issues like migration and climate change being on top of the political agenda internationally, such research remains highly relevant.

By examining counterpublic discourses around Islam as they appear in comment sections in three national contexts, the dissertation has provided empirical evidence for how such discourses also permeate online spaces in near proximity to mainstream publics (see also Chan, 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2018). This occurs even though Facebook comment sections may be substantially moderated, meaning most deviant comments would have been deleted before being collected for analysis in this study. Studying more secluded online arenas, e.g. right-wing alternative news sites, would likely show more extensive engagement in counterpublic discourses. At the same time, comment sections hosted by established news media are beneficial for counterpublic-minded individuals who may not be content with staying within their own echo chamber and who seeks to directly challenge mainstream-minded individuals. As pointed out by Downey and Fenton (2003, pp. 193–198), a degree of interaction with dominant publics may be one of the criteria for a counterpublic’s successful political intervention.

Given the substantial empirical evidence showing that reader comments (and popularity cues) can affect news audiences' perception of a topic, case, and the perceived quality of an article (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; von Sikorski, 2016; von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016), the prevalence of counterpublic discourses in such arenas are of potentially high importance. At the same time, even with comment sections' spatial proximity to established media content, it is hard to measure whether counterdiscursive comments actually have any effect with respect to what viewpoints can and cannot be discussed legitimately in the larger public sphere. To the extent that such wide-ranging effects exist, they may be slow and indirect. It can also be argued that the potential effects of counterdiscursive reader comments cannot fully be understood without considering that they constitute only one arena in a larger (online) sphere in which counterpublic-minded individuals operate, constituted by blogs, forums, alternative news sites and social networks. Put together, these spaces afford those who feel marginalised from the wider public sphere a substantial potential to contest—and influence—the boundaries of public discourse. This applies not only to historically disadvantaged groups but also to groups typically associated with privilege and access to powerful arenas in the public sphere.

Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation is not without limitations. It focused on a seven-month period influenced by some period-specific events, particularly the Danish ban of face-covering clothing. Future research should aim to study longer, or several, time periods to examine how (Scandinavian) news outlets and ordinary citizens discuss Islam on Facebook, as well as on other arenas. An interesting line of inquiry would also be to compare the content that news outlets choose to publish about Islam on Facebook and the content about Islam they only publish on their main websites. In other words, are those who mainly access news through Facebook exposed to

different news about Islam than those who mainly access news through the news outlets' main website? If this is the case, why?

Also, the analysis of the comment sections in this study focused on original comments, i.e. commenters' replies to posts rather than commenters' replies to other commenters. Future research should take into consideration also these comments to see whether this affects the sentiment expressed towards Islam and the prevalence of counterpublic discourses. Another limitation is that the study did not map *who* wrote the comments, so there is a chance that some highly active commenters have impacted the results to a certain extent. It would be potentially interesting in the future to examine more qualitatively how counterpublic-minded individuals' comments are met by other commenters, and how counterpublic-minded commenters articulate their counterpublicity in direct discussion with mainstream-minded individuals in such a setting.

Another limitation is that this study did not provide a clear figure for the exact prevalence of counterpublic discourses around Islam in the Scandinavian countries. Only comments where the Facebook users explicitly expressed a perception of being marginalised or excluded from a superordinate public sphere (deconstructing power relations) were firmly classified as an expression of counterpublic discourse (cf. Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). At the same time, the different contexts and many nuances that had to be taken into account in this study called for a more cautious approach with respect to the categories argumentative countering and strengthening identity. This approach served to acknowledge the reality of the fuzzy and shifting borders of the spheres of opinion in these debates.

Finally, this dissertation has studied counterpublic discourses as they operate in three (generally) similar national contexts. Future research should aim to do more comparative studies of counterdiscourses to see how these permeate the online realm, around various themes and (international and global) events. Such research

could benefit from the insights of researchers from different countries and would ideally be undertaken by a collaborative, cross-national team of scholars. At the same time, one should be aware of potential challenges associated with comparing counterpublics in different countries. For the results to be valid, it may be crucial to take into account the different national contexts as well as the immediate context of the counterpublics.

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Appendix 1: Variables Coded for Each Post

1. Nationality

Code the national origin of the news outlet that published the post.

V1	Norway
V2	Sweden
V3	Denmark

2. News outlet

Code the name of the news outlet that published the post.

V1	Aftenposten
V2	Dagbladet
V3	NRK
V4	TV2 (NO)
V5	VG
V6	Aftonbladet
V7	Expressen
V8	Nyheter24
V9	SVT
V10	TV4
V11	B.T.
V12	DR
V13	Ekstra Bladet
V14	Politiken
V15	TV2 (DK)

3. Date

Enter the date the post was published.

4. Source's position/role

Code the position/role of the main source of the post. The main source is defined here as the first source of a post, as long as the next source is not given twice as much space (in an article) or time (in a video). To be considered a source in a news post, the person must be quoted; it is not enough to just be mentioned. For posts that link to debate articles, code the author of the article as the main source. For video posts of debates and speeches, code the (main) speaker as the main source.

V1	Social democratic politician
V2	Centre/agrarian politician
V3	Green politician
V4	Liberal politician
V5	Conservative politician
V6	Right-wing populist politician
V7	Christian democratic politician
V8	Socialist politician
V9	Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*) politician
V10	Non-Scandinavian politician
V11	NGO
V12	Intergovernmental organisation
V13	Expert/intellectual/think tank
V14	Anti-Islamic organisation
V15	Advocacy group/demonstrator
V16	Private citizen
V17	Civil servant
V18	Businessman
V19	Cultural practitioner
V20	Scandinavian media professional
V21	Non-Scandinavian media professional
V22	Employer/employee in private business
V23	Religious leader/representative
V24	Royalty
V25	No source

Code V22 if the source is linked to a particular organisation/company. Code V18 if the source is not linked to a particular organisation/company.

5. Source's religious identity

If V1–V24 was coded for variable 4, code whether the main source is a Muslim. If V25 was coded for variable 4, skip this variable.

V1	Yes
V2	No
V3	Unclear

6. Muslim source's perspective

If V1 was coded for variable 5, code the "type" of Muslim perspective expressed by the Muslim source. If V2 or V3 was coded for variable 5 or if variable 5 was skipped, skip this variable.

V1	Liberal
V2	Conservative
V3	(Radical) Islamist
V4	Undefined

Code **Liberal** if the Muslim source expresses opposition to conservative or fundamentalist interpretations of Islam (e.g. criticises the use of hijab among children or conservative views on homosexuality).

Code **Conservative** if the Muslim source advocates marginal versions of Islam which may cause significant tension with the majority population (e.g. wear a niqab or refuse to shake hands with the opposite sex) but is not described as an Islamist or Jihadist.

Code **(Radical) Islamist** if the source is described as an Islamist or Jihadist.

Code **Undefined** if the Muslim source could not be placed into any of the previous categories.

7. Theme

Code the main theme of the post. If a post contains several themes and there is doubt pertaining to which theme is most prominent, use the headline to decide what the main theme is. If the main theme still cannot be decided, assess the main picture used in the post. If the main theme still cannot be determined, assess the introduction for what theme is emphasised the most.

V1	Hijab
V2	Burka/niqab
V3	Immigration/deportation
V4	Discrimination/racism
V5	Islamism/Jihadism/war
V6	Crime (not related to Jihadism)
V7	Art and culture
V8	Spirituality/rituals/holidays
V9	Honour culture
V10	Freedom of expression
V11	Names
V12	Conversion
V13	Food
V14	Education
V15	Fake news/bots
V16	LGBT
V17	Meta debate
V18	Political parties
V19	Love between Muslims and non-Muslims
V20	Handshaking
V21	Reform of Islam
V22	Elections
V23	Journalistic ethics
V24	Radicalism/extremism (other forms than Islamism/Jihadism)
V25	Illness
V26	Christian values
V27	Sports stars
V28	Archeologic findings
V29	Voluntary work

8. Genre

Code the genre of the post.

V1	News
V2	Debate
V3	Comedy

9. Sentiment

Assess how the post depicts Islam.

V1	Negative
V2	Positive
V3	Neutral
V4	Negatively loaded

Code a post as **Negative** if conveys criticism of Islam, Islamic practices, Muslims, immigration (from countries with a substantial Muslim population), and/or Islam/immigration-friendly parties/politicians. Do not code a post as Negative if it discusses or conveys criticism of Islamism, Jihadism, war, honour culture, or crime—unless the post (implicitly or explicitly) links Islam or Muslims in general to these phenomena.

Code a post as **Positive** if it conveys support, sympathy, respect or tolerance for Islam, Islamic practices or Muslims, emphasises problems with other religions than Islam, describes that problems associated with Islam are exaggerated or conveys criticism of Islam/immigrant-critical parties or politicians.

Code a post as **Neutral** if it does not convey a clear sentiment, for instance because it has an even emphasis on negative and positive elements.

Code a comment as **Negatively loaded** if it discusses/criticises the negatively charged themes Islamism/Jihadism/war, honour culture, or crime without linking these phenomena (implicitly or explicitly) to Islam or Muslims in general.

10. Popularity cues

Enter the number of popularity cues received by the post (in terms of likes, shares, comments, “Angry”, “Haha”, “Love”, “Sad”, and “Wow”).

Appendix 2: Variables Coded for Each Comment

1. Sentiment

Code the sentiment the comment expresses towards Islam.

V1	Negative
V2	Positive
V3	Neutral
V4	Anti-Islamist

Code a comment as **Negative** if criticises Islam, Islamic practices, Muslims, (Muslim) immigration, and/or Islam/immigration-friendly parties/politicians. Do not code a comment as Negative if it criticises Islamism, Jihadism, war, honour culture, or crime—unless the commenter blames Islam or Muslims in general for these phenomena.

Code a comment as **Positive** if it expresses support, sympathy, respect or tolerance for Islam, Islamic practices, and/or Muslims, emphasises problems with other religions than Islam, argues that problems associated with Islam are exaggerated, and/or criticises Islam/immigrant-critical parties/politicians.

Code a comment as **Neutral** if it does not communicate a clear sentiment, for instance because it has an even emphasis on negative and positive elements.

Code a comment as **Anti-Islamist** if it criticises Islamism, Jihadism, war, honour culture, or crime, without blaming these phenomena on Islam or Muslims in general.

2. Deconstructing power relations 1: Mainstream media

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment targets news outlets or news/journalists in general for being mainstream, dominant, biased, and/or censoring when it comes to how Islam and related issues are covered (“The media is of course not interested in covering Islam’s

violent proclivities factually", "It would be nice if the mainstream media could pretend for a second not to want to ruin the country with open borders", "The media continues its hate campaign against Muslims"). Also code Yes if an outlet is criticised for having removed a comment from the comment section. Also code Yes if the commenter argues that one should use (right-wing or left wing) alternative news media rather than established news outlets if one wants to get the truth. Do *not* code Yes if only one mainstream outlet is criticised for its coverage of Islam—unless this includes criticism of a fully state-financed public service broadcaster (*NRK*, *SVT*, *DR*) or if the commenter contends that the outlet should be boycotted (due to its coverage of Islam).

Code **No** if a comment does not criticise the mainstream media, or if it criticises the mainstream media but the criticism is not of a comprehensive and systematic character, for instance because the comment only criticises one news story or one news outlet ("The NRK's framing of the hijab in this article is quite unfortunate", "*Dagbladet*'s immigrant-liberal profile is painfully obvious in this story", "Ekstra Bladet is so racist").

3. Deconstructing power relations 2: **Political establishment**

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment criticises the political establishment for not taking (perceived) problems with Islam or Muslims seriously, for instance because politicians are considered to be naive, cowardly or politically correct ("The politicians should be punished for their lax approach to Muslim immigration", "Unfortunately our representatives are unable see the truth before their very eyes"). Also code Yes if an anti-Islam party or politician is considered to be an exception to the political establishment ("Where others are silent, Pernille Vermund dares to speak her mind"). Also code Yes if a comment criticises the political

establishment for being racist or discriminating against Islam or Muslims ("The politicians' rhetoric on Muslims is disgraceful", "It is sad that the politicians use their time to spread fear against Muslims"), or if an Islam-friendly party or politician is considered to be an exception to the political establishment.

Code **No** if a comment does not criticise the political establishment or if politicians are criticised, but this criticism does not target a broad range of politicians from the left to the right ("The Labour Party's immigration policies are misguided", "The Prime Minister is way off in this case", "Unlike the right, the left fails to adequately address problems with Islam").

4. Deconstructing power relations 3: **Criminal justice system**

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment criticises the police, courts, or criminal justice system in general for unfair treatment of Muslims or radical Islamists ("He will probably spend 7 days in a luxury facility with Xbox and Netflix", "The police is afraid to act against Muslims").

Code **No** if a comment does not criticise the police, courts or criminal justice system, or if it does criticise these actors but not in a systematic fashion ("The police did not handle this situation well", "I completely disagree with the court's decision in this case").

5. Deconstructing power relations 4: **Other actors**

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment criticises other powerful actors (than the mainstream media, political establishment, and criminal justice system) for dominating/censoring discussions around Islam (for instance the academic elite, tech giants, and

celebrities). Also code Yes if someone from the other actors category is pointed to as an exception to an otherwise reality-detached/naïve or racist/discriminatory group of actors ("Finally a celebrity who understands Islam").

Code **No** if a comment does not criticise other powerful actors (than the mainstream media, political establishment, and criminal justice system) for dominating/censoring discussions around Islam.

6. Deconstructing power relations 5: **Unspecified power relations**

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment deconstructs power relations without criticising a specific actor ("People nowadays are content with remaining politically correct", "It is impossible to criticise Islam without being branded a racist," "In the current debate climate, it is unfortunately impossible to say something positive about Islam without being branded naïve"). Also code Yes if a commenter describes their country as naïve, cowardly, clueless, politically correct or racist ("Sweden is afraid to act against Islam", "Norway is completely lost when it comes to handling Islam", "Denmark is so racist").

Code **No** if a comment does not deconstruct power relations by targeting unspecified power relations. Also code No if the comment deconstructs unspecified power relations but also targets the mainstream media, political establishment, criminal justice system, or other actors.

7. Did the comment deconstruct power relations?

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if Yes was coded for at least one of the variables 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Code **No** if No was coded for variables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

8. Strengthening of collective identity 1: Emotional content?

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if the comment is emotional, for instance because it uses emotionally charged words (“amazing”, “lovely”, “tragic”), humour, sarcasm/irony, CAPSLOCK, emojis (that expresses emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger), exclamation marks, and/or at least two question marks/dots in a row. Also code Yes if the comment is impolite and/or uses swear words.

Code **No** if the comment does not feature emotional content.

9. Strengthening of collective identity 2: Impolite tone

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment contains mocking or derogatory characteristics, for instance about political opponents and Muslims (“What an idiotic pig”, “She is completely braindead”, “He is such a Nazi”). Also code Yes if a comment tells people to leave the country (“Go back to where you come from”, “Get out!!”, “Bye bye :D”). Do *not* code Yes if a comment uses a swear word, unless the swear word is used in a comment that also contains mocking or derogatory remarks.

Code **No** if a comment does not use an impolite tone.

10. Strengthening of collective identity 3.1: Political identification?

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a commenter identifies with or indicates committed support for a political party or politician (“Go on, Tybring-Gjedde!”, “SD has my vote”, “The Centre Party <3!”).

Code **No** if a commenter does not identify with or express committed support for a political party or politician. This includes if a commenter expresses some agreement with a party or politician ("I will not vote for the party, but the SD unfortunately makes some good points").

11. Strengthening of collective identity 3.2: Which type of party does the commenter support?

V1	Extreme right[145]
V2	Right-wing populist
V3	Liberal/conservative
V4	Agrarian
V5	Social democratic
V6	Socialist/communist
V7	No political identification

12. Strengthening of collective identity 4: Alarmism

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment expresses a need to take drastic measures to avoid a societal collapse due to Islam or immigration ("We need to start deporting Muslims now if we want to avoid the end of Europe"). Also code Yes if the comment states that there is no reason to take measures because society is already doomed ("I don't know why you still bother with politics, the Islamisation is already complete"). Also code Yes if a comment expresses fears that Muslims will be stripped of all their rights, that a new war is necessary to conquer (what is perceived as) rampant anti-

[145] By extreme right, I here refer to the parties that are considered to be to the right of the dominant right-wing populist parties (FrP, SD, and DF) in matters relating to Islam (e.g. The New Right and Hard Line).

Muslim bigotry, or that the situation for Muslims today is reminiscent of the situation for Jews in the 1930s and 1940s.

Code **No** if a comment does not use alarmist rhetoric.

13. Strengthening of collective identity 5: Personal identity

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if a comment uses the words "we", "us", "our", or "ours" to indicate a sense of personal belonging to a continent, nation, religion, organisation, or other community. Also code Yes if the commenter uses the flag emoji of their country.

Code **No** if the comment does not indicate of sense of personal belonging to a continent, nation, religion, organization, or other community.

14. Did the comment strengthen a sense of collective identity among likeminded individuals?

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if Yes was coded for at least one of the variables 8, 9, 10, 12, or 13.

Code **No** if No was coded for variables 8, 9, 10, 12, and 13.

15. Argumentative countering 1.1: Does the comment discuss any of these (Islamic) practices/traits associated with Islam, and, if so, which one(s)?

V1	Face veils (burka/niqab)
V2	Headscarves (hijab/abaya)
V3	Not shaking hands with the opposite sex
V4	Islamic holidays
V5	Circumcision
V6	Halal food
V7	Call to prayer
V8	Islamic private schools
V9	Mosques
V10	The Quran

V11	Several of these practices/traits
V12	None of these practices/traits

16. Argumentative countering 1.2: What is the commenter's stance on this Islamic practice/trait associated with Islam?

V1	It should be completely banned/should have been banned a long time ago
V2	It should be banned in certain areas
V3	It should be criticised (but not banned)
V4	It should be accepted/tolerated
V5	A combination of V1 and V2
V6	A combination of V1/V2 and V3
V7	A combination of V3 and V4
V8	Unclear
V9	None of the practices/traits associated with Islam mentioned in variable 16 are addressed

17. Argumentative countering 2: Does the comment explicitly support another country's policies/discourse on Islam, and if so, which country?

V1	Sweden
V2	Norway
V3	Denmark
V4	Switzerland
V5	Austria
V6	USA
V7	China
V8	France
V9	Iran
V10	Germany
V11	The Netherlands
V12	"Several other countries"
V13	The comment does not explicitly support another country's policies or discourse

Only code **V1-V12** if a comment either mentions the country/politician from that country or uses the flag emoji of that country ("Go Denmark!", "Congratulations to Sebastian Kurz for showing how it is done") or explicitly argues that the other country's policies/discourse should also be used in the commenters' home country

(“We should have the same laws here”). This means that **V13** should be coded for not only comments that do not support another country’s policies/discourse on Islam but also for comments that support another country’s policy/discourse without (explicitly) championing the country, unless the commenter states clearly that the policy/discourse should apply also in Norway/Sweden/Denmark.

18. Argumentative countering 3: Does the comment make a general evaluation of Islam/Muslims, and, if so, what characterises this evaluation?

V1	Negativity
V2	Positivity
V3	Nuance/neutrality
V4	Unclear
V5	The comment does not make a general evaluation of Islam or Muslims

Negative comments feature negative essentialist/generalising views of Islam and/or Muslims (“Islam stands for violence and war”, “Islam is a dangerous political ideology, not a religion”, “Unfortunately Muslims are unable to integrate into Western society”, “Muslims are always so easily offended”). This includes negative essentialist comments about the Quran and the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Positive comments feature positive essentialist/generalising views of Islam and/or Muslims (“Islam stands for peace”, “Muslims are wonderful people”, “No Muslim parent would force their child to wear a hijab”, “ISIS has nothing to do with Islam”). This includes positive essentialist comments about the Quran and the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Nuanced/neutral comments emphasise that there are different interpretations of Islam (“Remember that most Muslims do not use a face veil, this is typically only practiced by women who are advocates of Salafism”, “I have only met one Muslim who did not want to shake my hand, “We have to remember that these people

practice an extreme version of Islam, that is vastly different from how many moderate Muslims choose to lead their lives", "Not all Muslims do that").

19. Argumentative countering 4: Does the comment address conversion to Islam, and, if so, what is the commenter's stance on conversion to Islam?

V1	That it is insane/idiotic/deeply problematic
V2	That it is great/unproblematic
V3	That it is challenging (but not insane, idiotic, or deeply problematic)
V4	Unclear
V5	The comment does not address conversion to Islam

20. Argumentative countering 5: Does the comment engage in political labelling of political opponents, and, if so, which label is used?

V1	Racist/Islamophobe/Nazi/fascist
V2	Islamist/terrorist
V3	Communist/socialist
V4	Extremist
V5	Radical
V6	Totalitarian
V7	Populist
V8	Neoliberal
V9	The comment does not engage in political labelling

Code **V9** if a comment engages in political labelling of actors that the news media's posts have described as Islamists/jihadists.

21. Argumentative countering 6: Does the comment discuss physical or verbal harassment of political opponents, and, if so, what is the commenter's stance on this harassment?

V1	It is acceptable against Muslims
V2	It is acceptable against far-right politicians
V3	It is unacceptable
V4	Unclear

V5	The comment does not address physical or verbal harassment of political opponents

Code **V5** if a comment argues that it is acceptable to harass Islamists and/or jihadists (opinions on how to handle Islamists and jihadists are considered in variable 22).

22. Argumentative countering 7: Does the comment discuss (alleged) Islamists/jihadists, and, if so, what is the commenter's stance on (how to handle) Islamists/jihadists?

V1	They should be killed extrajudicially or receive the death penalty
V2	They should be deported/lose their citizenship
V3	They should be imprisoned
V4	They should stay in ISIS territory and not be allowed to return to Scandinavia
V5	They should be allowed to return from ISIS territory and receive their sentence in Scandinavia
V6	They should be forgiven/not sentenced
V7	They are no worse than the USA/the West/Israel
V8	They should be excluded from organisations/their organisation should be banned
V9	They should not receive public support/funding
V10	Unspecified condemnation
V11	Unclear
V12	The comment does not discuss Islamists/jihadists

The difference between **V10** and **V11** is that the former is used for comments that clearly criticise Islamists/jihadists, whereas the latter is used when it cannot be discerned what the comments mean about these actors.

23. Argumentative countering 8: Does the comment discuss religion in general, and, if so, what is the commenter's attitude towards religion?

V1	Religion should be banned/completely removed from public space
V2	Religion should play a minor/smaller role in public space (but not be banned or completely removed)
V3	Religious freedom should be respected/strengthened
V4	It is important/acceptable to criticise/ridicule religion
V5	Religion is fundamentally bad

V6	Religion is fundamentally good
V7	Religion can be a force for good as well as a force for bad
V8	Unclear
V9	The comment does not discuss religion in general

24. Argumentative countering 9: Does the commenter discuss Muslim immigration to their country/the West, and, if so, what is the commenters' attitude towards Muslim immigration?

V1	It should be stopped
V2	It should be restricted to a higher degree than it is today (but not be completely stopped)
V3	Female Muslim immigrants should be prioritised over male Muslim immigrants
V4	The borders should be completely open
V5	Muslim immigration should be accepted/tolerated (but the borders should not be completely open)
V6	Unclear/other
V7	The comment does not discuss Muslim immigration

25. Did the comment engage in argumentation?

V1	Yes
V2	No

Code **Yes** if the comment discussed at least one of the topics from variable 15-25.

Code **No** if none of the topics from variable 15-25 were discussed.

26. Popularity cues

Enter the number of popularity cues received by the comment (in terms of likes, "Angry", "Haha", "Love", "Sad", and "Wow").

27. Nationality

Code the national origin of the news outlet that published the post to which the comment is responding.

V1	Norway
V2	Sweden

V3	Denmark

28. News outlet

Code the name of the news outlet that published the post to which the comment is responding.

V1	Aftenposten
V2	Dagbladet
V3	NRK
V4	TV2 (NO)
V5	VG
V6	Aftonbladet
V7	Expressen
V8	Nyheter24
V9	SVT
V10	TV4
V11	B.T.
V12	DR
V13	Ekstra Bladet
V14	Politiken
V15	TV2 (DK)

Appendix 3: Results from Subcategories of Argumentative Countering

Religion in general

Table: Prevalence of arguments in relation to religion in general, percent of all comments in the three countries (N=6797)

	Norway (1207)	**Sweden (1710)**	**Denmark (3880)**
It is important/acceptable to criticise/ridicule religion	2 (19)	2 (40)	0 (8)
Religion should play a minor role in public space (but not be banned)	1 (18)	2 (31)	0 (15)
Religion is fundamentally bad	1 (12)	1 (13)	0 (14)
Religious freedom should be respected/strengthened	0 (2)	1 (12)	0 (14)
Religion should be banned/ completely removed from public space	0 (5)	0 (4)	0 (2)
Religion can be a force for good as well as a force for bad	0 (4)	0 (4)	0 (2)
Religion is fundamentally good	0 (1)	0 (1)	0 (2)
Unclear	0 (4)	0 (6)	0 (3)

Conversion to Islam

Table: Prevalence of arguments in relation to conversion to Islam, percent of all comments in the three countries (N=6797)

Converting to Islam is…	**Norway (1207)**	**Sweden (1710)**	**Denmark (3880)**
Insane/idiotic/deeply problematic	2 (20)	2 (32)	2 (68)
Great/unproblematic	1 (10)	2 (28)	1 (42)
Challenging (but not idiotic/deeply problematic)	0 (1)	0	0 (8)
Unclear	1 (7)	0 (7)	0 (12)

Muslim immigration

Table: Prevalence of arguments in relation to Muslim immigration, percent of all comments in the three countries (N=6797)

	Norway (1207)	Sweden (1710)	Denmark (3880)
It should be completely stopped	1 (9)	0 (8)	2 (67)
It should be accepted/tolerated	1 (12)	0 (2)	1 (54)
It should be more restricted (but not completely stopped)	0 (3)	1 (16)	0 (18)
Female Muslim immigrants should be prioritised over male Muslim immigrants	0	0 (4)	0
The borders should be completely open	0	0	0 (2)
Unclear/other	0	0	0 (4)

Political labelling

Table: Percent of comments engaging in different forms of political labelling (N=6797)

	Norway (1207)	Sweden (1710)	Denmark (3880)
Racist/Islamophobe/ Nazi/fascist	1 (13)	2 (36)	2 (59)
Islamist/terrorist	0 (2)	0 (6)	1 (27)
Totalitarian	0 (5)	0	0 (7)
Extremist	0 (2)	0 (3)	0 (4)
Populist	0	0 (1)	0 (8)
Communist/socialist	0 (4)	0	0 (4)
Other	0 (1)	0	0 (6)

Championing other countries

Table: Prevalence of comments championing other countries, percent of all comments in the three countries (N=6797)

	Norway (1207)	**Sweden (1710)**	**Denmark (3880)**
Denmark	1 (11)	3 (57)	
Austria	0 (3)	1 (11)	0 (16)
Norway		1 (15)	0 (1)
USA	0 (1)	0 (6)	0 (1)
Switzerland	0	0	0 (7)
Other	0 (2)	0 (2)	0 (14)

The objectives of this dissertation are twofold: First, the dissertation seeks to contribute to existing literature on Scandinavian discourse on Islam by comparing Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish content on Facebook, a central arena for news as well as public debate. Second, it aims to contribute to existing literature on counterpublics as it attempts to analyse to what extent counterpublic discourses appear in mainstream news outlets' comment sections on Facebook. Existing research on online counterpublics has largely focused on (progressive and left-wing) counterpublic collectives in secluded communicative spaces, such as blogs, discussions forums, and alternative news sites. In contrast, this thesis analyses (both Islam-hostile and Islam-sympathetic) counterpublic discourses expressed in the comment sections of highly influential, mainstream news media.

A quantitative content analysis is carried out of Facebook posts (and associated articles) published by mainstream news outlets (N=602) and comments written by ordinary citizens in response to these posts (N=6797), in data from 2018. It is found that while the news outlets' Facebook posts depict Islam mainly positively, the user comments are largely negative.

While a majority of the comments are found to express a mainstream view, a substantial minority also engages in counterpublic discourses, contesting the bounds of established discourse around Islam in the Scandinavian public spheres. It is, however, mainly those who are sceptical of Islam and/or Muslims who engage in this agitational activity. Particularly the Swedish comment sections are found to be permeated by Islam-sceptic counterdiscursive comments, while this is less so the case in Denmark, with Norway in a middle position. I argue that different national contexts around Islam, immigration, integration, and national identity have created varying incentives for Scandinavian citizens to challenge the limits of the debatthrough the online realm, thus leading to varying prevalence of counterdiscursive comments in the three countries' comment sections.

In light of the finding that both Islam-sceptic and Islam-friendly commenters engage in counterpublic discourses, the dissertation highlights the need to view counterpublics as self-perceived correctives to an excluding mainstream rather than as excluded per se.

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