Metajournalism and Media Critique: Responses to "Extremist Voices" in the Digitalized News Landscape

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Metadebates concerning how the news media deal with extremism have intensified in the digital media landscape. This article analyzes metajournalistic discourse following a controversial studio interview with the spokesperson of a Norwegian Salafi-jihadist group. To illuminate how boundaries of appropriate public debate are negotiated, the article analyzes how this journalistic performance was debated among journalists and commentators, news sources, and readers in online comments sections. The study demonstrates how editorial legacy media invite a broad metadebate but control and define the debate by positioning themselves as defenders against extremism, evoking normative ideals of the role of journalism in democracy and foregrounding the preventive, clarifying, and cohesive effects of including extremist voices. News sources and online commenters are notably more critical, emphasizing the negative consequences of inclusion and warning that inclusion may serve to consolidate extremist views, amplify threats and prejudice, and make extremists the symbolic representatives of Muslims in general. Theoretically, the article contributes to the literature on media and extremism, media criticism, and mediated negotiations of the boundaries of public debate.

Keywords: boundary work, extremism, journalism, metajournalistic discourse

Violent extremism is high on the global public agenda, raising important questions about how liberal democracies should deal with actors who promote antidemocratic and violent views. Central to these debates is the role of the news media in dealing with extremism, including the extent to which actors who promote antidemocratic and violent views should be included in mainstream debates and in what form and context (Cottle, 2006; Eide, Kjølstad, & Naper, 2013; Larsen, 2018). Confronted by the extremist threat, legacy news

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media[1] often serve as arena and actor in repair work to convey and maintain communal solidarity, resilience, and cohesion (Alexander, 2004, 2011; Enjolras, 2017; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017; Schudson, 2011; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). The role of the news media and the boundaries of depicting extremism and terrorists are routinely debated in many countries. The discussions revolve around editorial decisions not to print images of perpetrators of terror attacks (see, e.g., Borger, 2016); campaigns urging the media to avoid using certain words in reporting terrorism and terrorists (e.g., Davies, 2018); and ongoing conversations among journalists on whether and how to report on extremist messages found online (Larsen, 2018; Phillips, 2018).

Although debates about what constitutes appropriate news discourses on extremism and terrorism are not new, these questions have intensified, taking on new forms in the digital communication environment. Due to altered premises about public communication, the threat from extremist groups represents a seemingly ubiquitous and permanent condition, which news organizations must address. Editorial conceptions of which voices and actors are deemed legitimate and which are perceived as deviant have become urgent and contested (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017; Larsen, 2018). Furthermore, how to handle deviant political actors when interactive media enable a widened media debate outside of editorial selection and editing processes has become a crucial challenge (Cottle, 2014; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016; Midtbøen, Steen-Johnsen, & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017). Similarly, the need for journalists to engage in critical journalistic metadebates has been reinvigorated by increased competition from digital news providers and audiences' dwindling levels of trust in established news media (Carlson, 2016; Haas, 2007). By analyzing the metadebates and media criticism following the publication of a studio interview with a controversial jihadist in Norway's leading news outlet,[2] we explore how boundaries of free speech, appropriate public debate, and journalistic performance are contested and negotiated within and beyond journalism.

In mid-August 2014, the largest national news outlet in Norway, VG, published a 42-minute online studio interview with Ubaydullah Hussain, the highly controversial spokesperson of the Norwegian Salafi-jihadist group The Prophet's Ummah. Since 2012, the group had stirred public debate and garnered extensive media attention. The attention was in large part due to the group holding public demonstrations displaying jihadi rhetoric and actively recruiting to the Syrian conflict, including to the group Islamic State (IS). The mobilization, carried out by a group of "homegrown extremists" with significant capacity for outreach and recruitment, represented a new type of jihadism in the Norwegian context (for more, see Lia & Nesser, 2016).[3] During the same period, Hussain had publicly proclaimed himself the leader of the group and had been charged and sentenced for threats against journalists and incitements to violence on his open Facebook page (he was later sentenced on terrorism charges). In addition to the prior media spotlight on The Prophet's Ummah and its spokesperson, the interview was published at a time when IS recently had

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[1] We use the term *legacy news media* here to refer to large, established, and professional editorial news media that reach relatively large audiences and that are the main providers of news journalism in a given context.

[2] For the full interview, see VGTV (2014).

[3] As in many other democracies, Norwegian authorities mobilized against potential Islamist threats after 9/11 and other major terror attacks, although the measures taken were less far-reaching than the legislation implemented in other Western countries.

proclaimed its establishment of a caliphate and when young Norwegians had started traveling to join the Syrian conflict.[4]

In the interview with VG, claiming to speak on behalf of all Muslims, Hussain voiced his support for the establishment of an Islamic state in general and for the group Islamic State in particular. Claiming that IS was grossly misrepresented by Western authorities and media, he defended IS's beheadings and jihadi-inspired attacks in Western countries (VGTV, 2014). In other words, the views expressed in the interview advocated a violent revolutionary version of Islam (cf. Maher, 2016) and deviated significantly from core values associated with liberal democracies such as Norway. The journalist conducting the interview primarily posed questions on The Prophet's Ummah views regarding an Islamic state (Hussain's perception of an ideal society). Rather than being markedly confrontational and critical, the journalist's follow-up questions were mainly directed at elaboration and explanation. Overall, the length of the statement, the authoritative setting of the studio interview, the priority given to the exclusive interview, and the passive interviewing style made the interview an unprecedented public performance by an extreme Islamist.[5]

As primary arenas for public debate, news organizations reflect and define boundaries of legitimate versus deviant views, actors, and debates (Hallin, 1986; Midtbøen et al., 2017). An extensive literature addresses the relationship between news media and (violent) extremism. One tradition foregrounds terrorism as a communicative phenomenon and warns that the media contribute to spreading and legitimizing extremist actors and views, amplifying threats and insecurity, and increasing stereotypes and prejudice (see Cottle, 2006; Epkins, 2017; Nacos, 2016). Within this approach, digital and social media are perceived as additional platforms used to spread extremist views, engage in recruitment efforts, and capture news media attention (Nacos, 2016, pp. 386–391). Other scholars have underscored the democratic importance of competing and dissenting voices in countering the radicalizing and polarizing potentials of the online environment (Sunstein, 2003, 2009). From this perspective, extremist voices should be invited into mainstream news discourses and then openly debated and combated (Eide et al., 2013; Larsen, 2018).

By granting an extended voice to an extremist political actor in a news format normally reserved for elites (Hallin, 1986; Larsen, 2018), the interview with Hussain markedly deviated from common practices in Norwegian newsrooms and stretched the established boundaries of news access. The studio interview thus represents a critical incident (Carlson, 2017; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2017; Zelizer, 1993), particularly well-suited to analyze expectations and negotiations regarding the normative boundaries of journalism and public debate. Journalists are only one set of voices engaging in contemporary debates over journalistic performance, practices, and norms, as digital media have created new spaces for audience engagement

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[4] It is estimated that 90 Norwegians (a large number relative to the population) had traveled to join the Syrian conflict by 2015 (Lia & Nesser, 2016).

[5] The studio interview was indeed unprecedented, as illustrated by the media debate it stirred. Simultaneously, the metadebates can be seen as a continuation of the discussions among and within Norwegian newsrooms after the 2011 Oslo attack (see Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017). Although the two events are not comparable, the metadebates that followed them tap into similar questions about the boundaries of public debate.

with journalism practice (Carlson, 2009, 2016, 2017; Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016; Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012).

To address how boundaries of free speech, appropriate public debate, and journalistic performance are discussed within and beyond journalism, this article analyzes how a controversial journalistic performance was debated and justified among: (1) journalists and commentators (in-house experts), (2) news sources (media-external sources) invited to speak in legacy news media, and (3) readers in online comments sections. Although Islamist extremists receive massive media coverage, extremists situated within the sphere of explicit deviance are rarely given extended voice in the mainstream news media (Larsen, 2018; Taylor, 2014). The metadebate following the controversial interview thus represents a unique opportunity to examine how the boundaries of free speech and appropriate public debate—and the role of legacy news media in these matters—are contested, negotiated, and reestablished.

The article first presents a theoretical framework with emphasis on journalistic boundary work, metajournalism, and media criticism. Then we discuss the Norwegian context (the media system and freedom of speech) and elaborate on the data material and methods. The analysis sections probe the metadebate from three perspectives (arguments from journalists, news sources, and audiences). We conclude with a discussion of how the debate caused unification and new demarcations.

Theoretical Framework: Boundaries, Metajournalism, and Media Criticism

Actors internal and external to journalism engage in contestations over the boundaries of free speech and appropriate public debate, including which political actors and views are deemed legitimate and how to deal with deviance. The news media can be conceived both as actors whose practices shape the boundaries of appropriate debate and as arenas in which these contestations play out (Carlson, 2017; Midtbøen et al., 2017). The notion of boundaries in the social sciences points to the manner in which societal norms, principles, and practices are drawn, contested, and negotiated through discursive processes (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Midtbøen et al., 2017). In their influential discussion on boundaries, Lamont and Molnár (2002) define "symbolic boundaries" as

> conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. . . . Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership. (p. 168)

Boundary contestations concern both the boundaries of journalistic practice and, more broadly, the boundaries of free speech and appropriate public debate and the societal implications of journalistic practice. In an analysis of the boundaries of journalism, Carlson (2016) proposes a theory of metajournalistic discourse, defined as public evaluations of news texts, news practices, and news reception. Broadly understood, metajournalistic discourse can be conducted by actors both inside and outside journalism who "publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350) and who draw on journalistic and democratic ideals to assess and debate media performance (Carlson, 2009, 2017; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016).

Several studies have analyzed how actors internal and external to journalism mobilize expectations of traditional journalistic routines and norms—such as balance, accuracy, and autonomy—to assess and engage in criticism of news media performance (Carlson, 2009; Craft et al., 2016; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016, 2017; Vos et al., 2012). Criticism of and debate over journalism tend to involve the relationship between journalism and the fields of politics and economics (Carlson, 2009; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016; Vos et al., 2012). Moreover, actors from both the left and right of the political spectrum foreground a perceived lack of journalistic autonomy (Carlson, 2009), and criticism of media performance typically assigns journalism a commercial bias, which it is argued leads to tendencies of sensationalism (Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016, p. 289). Studies have found some evidence of criticism of the efficacy of journalistic norms and practices, but public criticism of journalism tends to emphasize traditional journalistic ideals as golden standards against which journalism is judged (Vos et al., 2012).

Previous research has found that, although journalists have traditionally been reluctant to engage in public self-criticism (Thomas & Finneman, 2014), increased competition online and plummeting levels of public trust have pushed journalists to engage in critical metadebates and to be more transparent (Carlson, 2016, 2017; Haas, 2007). Public journalistic metadebates often take the form of paradigm repair, explicitly denouncing colleagues who have violated professional norms while reaffirming core commitments and values (Carlson, 2017; Thomas & Finneman, 2014). Justifications for journalistic practices demonstrate how the journalistic community defines and defends appropriate practices, norms, and values (Ryfe, 2017). Similarly, in dealing with deviance, scholars have pointed out that the legacy news media engage in repair work—"collective rituals" or "counterperformances"—to defend shared democratic values and convey and maintain communal solidarity and resilience (Alexander, 2004, 2011; Enjolras, 2017). On the topic of extremist Islamism in particular, scholars have noted that, post-9/11, journalism has drawn boundaries between "moderate" Muslims and extreme Islamists and between (violent) extreme Islamists and (peaceful) Western democracies (e.g., Alexander, 2004, 2011; Jackson, 2007; Kundnani, 2014). It is argued that these boundary drawings in turn serve to strengthen societal solidarity and accentuate specific societal values while also deepening divisions between the (Western) nation and the (extreme Islamist) enemy (Alexander, 2011); blurring boundaries between Islam and extremism; and rendering Muslims in general a potential threat and source of suspicion (Jackson, 2007; Kundnani, 2014).

Whereas media criticism traditionally has been a debate among experts, scholars, and politicians, audiences today increasingly engage with, debate, and criticize journalistic output, thereby addressing the boundaries of journalism practice and public debate (Carlson, 2017). Although some studies have examined the new formats of "crowd-criticism," audiences have largely been overlooked as media critics (notable exceptions include Craft et al., 2016; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016; Vos et al., 2012). To contribute insights into the new complexity of current metadebates, media criticism, and boundaries work, the present study analyzes metadebates and media criticism of elite actors (in op-ed sections and legacy news media) and readers (in comments sections) in the aftermath of a controversial editorial decision.

Media and Freedom of Speech in Norway

Norway has a diverse press, with newspaper readership among the highest in the world. In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classification of media systems, Norway forms part of the democratic corporatist

model. In a large-scale empirical reevaluation of their media system theory, the Nordic media model has been categorized as a distinct cluster, characterized by highly professional journalism, an inclusive press market, powerful public broadcasting, and generous press subsidies in combination with low levels of ownership regulation and political parallelism (Brüggermann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014). Similarly, Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, and Moe (2014) highlight central aspects of the Nordic media model as including universally available communication systems and institutionalized editorial freedom. Norway has, for several years, ranked among the top countries in terms of press freedom (see, e.g., Reporters Without Borders, 2019). The Norwegian media rely on a self-regulatory system. Editorial responsibilities are outlined in the Rights and Duties of the Editor, and the ethical guidelines for journalistic practices can be found in the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press. The code of ethics is not a legally binding document, but it is supported by all organizations representing publishers and journalists in Norway. The code does not contain specific guidelines for reporting on extremism or terrorism (see the Norwegian Press Complaints Commission, 2015, for the complete code of ethics).

Today, the Nordic media landscape has been affected by international trends such as falling revenues and increased global and digital competition. Although Norwegian paid print circulation has dramatically declined, legacy media organizations are dominant players in digital news and still hold central roles as trusted primary sources of news for much of the Norwegian population (Allern & Pollack, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Norway has comparatively high levels of institutional trust (Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2017), although trust in the news media is average (Moe & Sakariassen, 2019).

Norway is an advanced information society in which 99% of the 5.4 million population have online access (Moe & Sakariassen, 2019). At the time of the Hussain interview, most legacy news organizations offered online comments sections, mostly taking an interventionist approach emphasizing strong editorial control, including precontrol of messages, active moderators, and the identification and registration of participants (see Ihlebæk, Løvlie, & Mainsah, 2014). In the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*, about half of the Norwegian respondents said that they actively comment on news in social or networked media. About 10% stated that, in an average week, they participate in open comments sections on news sites (Sakariassen, Hovden & Moe, 2017, p. 22)—a number that corresponds with previous studies of participation in online comments sections (Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, 2013). People who are more interested in political news are more active than those who are less interested (Sakariassen et al., 2017).

Methods and Data

The data sample was selected through a keyword search for "Profetens Ummah" (The Prophet's Ummah) and "Ubaydullah Hussain" (the name of the spokesperson interviewed) in the Retriever database. In this article, we view Hussain as an extremist and as an advocate for extreme and violent jihadism. In academic and popular debates, the terms *violent extremism* and *extremism* are often used interchangeably to denote actors advocating or employing physical violence to achieve political objectives (see, e.g., Nesser, 2015, p. 6). *Jihadism* and *extreme Islamism* refer to a violent revolutionary version of Islam (see, e.g., Maher, 2016).

In February 2014, before the interview took place, Ubaydullah Hussain was sentenced to prison for threats, hateful expressions, and felonies against personal liberty.[6] Although there is little doubt that Hussain maintained an extreme ideology, it can nevertheless be difficult to reach consensual definitions of symbolic and politicized concepts such as extreme Islamism and their surrounding discourses (cf. Alexander, 2011; Jackson, 2007). We argue that difficulties in reaching consensus on how extremism should be defined and how it should be dealt with underline the importance of studying issues pertaining to extremism and the discourses and boundary contestations surrounding these phenomena.

We selected for analysis all articles published between August 17 (the day after the interview) and August 26, 2014, in Norwegian national and regional news outlets that included a response to the interview with Ubaydullah Hussain and/or how to deal with his extremist views. The period selected for analysis includes the most intense phase of debate following the publication: from the day after the interview to the day after a public demonstration against extremism, spurred by the interview, was held in Oslo. The demonstration attracted 1,500–2,000 people, including national politicians and religious leaders. To illuminate how the journalistic metadiscourses and media critiques played out, this article analyzes the debates and viewpoints among three sets of actors: (1) journalists and commentators (in-house experts/media-internal actors), (2) news sources (media-external actors) invited to speak in legacy news media, and (3) readers in online comments sections.

First, we examine how journalists and commentators discussed and justified the publication of the controversial extremist interview. As Norway's biggest and most influential legacy news outlet, VG is a multimedia news organization with 2.36 million readers on its print, online, and mobile editions. VG published 20 articles about the Islamist extremist interview in the 10 days following the event (11 news articles, five commentaries and editorials written by VG journalists, and four op-eds). In addition, to examine the broader journalistic community's response to the interview, we analyzed the coverage of the interview in the major national and regional Norwegian legacy news media. The following outlets were included: *Adresseavisen*, *Aftenposten*, *Bergens Tidende*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagsavisen*, *Klassekampen*, *Nordlys*, NRK (online), *Stavanger Aftenblad*, and *Vårt Land.* A total of 136 articles (118 news pieces and 18 opinion pieces) were selected. In the analysis of the news outlets, we distinguish between (1) journalists/commentators and (2) external evaluations by sources. The main sources included national politicians (Muslims and non-Muslims), spokespersons from minority and religious organizations (mainly Muslims), researchers (mainly non-Muslims), and unaffiliated news sources that were Norwegian Muslims. Most of the sources invited can be characterized as elites in terms of having formal political power, having academic expert knowledge, or being representatives of organized interests. However, in addition to established elites, several young, previously relatively unknown Muslim voices became prominent actors in the news debate following the publication of the interview. These were the initiators of the public demonstration against extremism spurred by the interview with Hussain. By including VG and competing news outlets, we analyzed whether journalists across media organizations defended or criticized the interview and whether the criticism expressed by other sources differed between outlets.

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[6] Three years after the interview was published, in 2017, Hussain was sentenced to nine years in prison for participation in terrorism under the Norwegian General Civil Penal Code (Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 1902), including for having recruited two members to Islamic State.

Second, in analyzing how VG's readers reacted to the interview, we included metadebate and media criticism that were expressed in online comments. Of the 20 articles published in VG, 19 were available for comments. Of the 1,200 comments posted, we selected those that are thematically relevant here—comments concerning journalism and editorial decisions, the limits of free speech, and/or responses to the role of public communication regarding deviant political actors. This resulted in a sample of 350 comments, which were subsequently read and analyzed by the authors. The comments sections were actively modified by VG. Posts deemed inappropriate were deleted, and users were required to log in and comment with their full name. By including the two VG platforms (editorial and comments sections), we study metadebates and media criticism on platforms characterized by different editorial practices, degrees of openness, form, and participants: news and opinion pieces, which are pre-edited and restricted in terms of access, and online comments sections, which are post-edited and, in principle, open to participation by everyone.

Inspired by previous empirical studies of metajournalistic discourse and media criticism (in particular, Craft et al., 2016; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2016; Thomas & Finneman, 2014; Vos et al., 2012), we approached the data inductively and qualitatively rather than with predefined analytical categories. Both authors first read the entire data sets in chronological order to get an overview of how the debate played out and to meaningfully define criteria for selecting the material. We then selected the articles, comments, and quotes concerning journalism and editorial decisions, the limits of free speech, and/or the role and boundaries of public communication regarding extremist political actors. To make sure that our selection criteria were applied consistently, we read the material several times.

After selecting the material for analysis, each author individually identified the main responses to the interview. Then we synthesized our findings and compared the metadiscourses among the different actors on the different platforms. To ensure consistency in our analysis and to make sure our readings gave justice and nuance to the debates as they unfolded, we read and categorized the data material several times, going back and forth between our research questions, the empirical material, and our initial analyses.

To illustrate the tone and voice in the evaluations, quotes from the metadebates are included in the analysis section. Quotes from legacy media are identified, whereas quotes from online comment sections are synthesized and anonymized, as advised by the Norwegian Internet research ethics guidelines (Fossheim & Ingierd, 2015). Rather than conducting a study on deliberation and debate in legacy media and comments sections in general, our aim here is to study metajournalistic discourse and media criticism among three types of actors on two different platforms.

Analysis

Overall, the extreme Islamist ideology and worldview expressed in Hussain's interview was unanimously condemned and countered in the subsequent debate. The debate following the publication of the interview primarily concerned what constitutes appropriate and constructive ways of dealing with extremism in the public sphere rather than whether the views expressed were legitimate. The interview spurred debate on the boundaries of free speech and mediated debate, including the role of the news media as actor and arena in marking the boundaries of legitimate debate and how society should counter

extremism and protect core societal values through deliberation, condemnation, and opposition in the public sphere.

In the days following the interview, VG brought in various sources—including researchers, national politicians, spokespersons from minority and religious organizations, and unaffiliated Muslim voices—to contextualize and comment on the interview. Moreover, VG's internal political commentators actively engaged in the debate through commentaries and editorials that discussed the role of the news media in relation to extremism, including questions concerning the extent to which extreme views should be included or muted and with what possible consequences. In addition, the interview contributed to a broad national news debate, as it was greeted with significant attention from all national and regional Norwegian dailies.

The Perspective of Journalists and Internal Commentators:
Preventive, Clarifying, and Unifying Effects

In essence, journalists and commentators across news outlets justified the publication of the interview by underscoring the positive democratic effects of the subsequent debate. Political commentators and editorials highlighted the important role of the news media in informing the public of the existence and views of extremist groups and emphasized three interrelated positive effects of publishing the controversial interview: preventive, clarifying, and cohesive/unifying effects.

As expected, the justifications for publishing the extremist interview—arguing that it served to raise public awareness about Islamist extremism, fostered criticism of and mobilization against actors holding extreme views, defended core democratic values, increased societal cohesion, and prevented radicalization— were promoted by the news organization where it was first aired. Arguing for the exposure of extremism rather than muting extremist positions in the current media landscape, a prominent VG commentator wrote:

> Previously, you could actually silence extremism. . . . Today's extremists are not recruited via the large media channels. They are recruited via the Internet. The large media organizations' task is to find them, identify them, put them into the limelight, show who they are and what they stand for. (VG, August 19, 2014)

Furthermore, the VG commentators underscored that the publication of the Hussain interview forced Muslim organizations and individuals to mobilize against extreme Islamists and to clarify and mark the boundaries between Muslims in general and extreme Islamists. Moreover, the mobilization following the publication was valued for its unifying effect, gathering various groups in society to protest against a common "enemy," using "democracy's strongest weapon; the word" (VG, August 23, 2014). This perspective was also highlighted in an editorial encouraging a public demonstration against extremism, which was held in Oslo as a reaction to the extremist views of The Prophet's Ummah: "We all have, with our different faiths and backgrounds, an opportunity to together isolate the Islamists and undermine extremism" (VG editorial, August 25, 2014). Thus, arguing for the need to expose and confront extremism, a prominent discourse in the news coverage concerned the need for society in general and Muslims in particular to stand up against and confront the extreme views epitomized by The Prophet's Ummah. This discourse did not directly address whether public debates should allow for extremist views; rather, it emphasized calls for action, arguing that

society needs to defend core democratic values from the extreme Islamist threat and firmly condemn and confront extremists. This discourse was prevalent among editorial writers and the initial framing of the responses to the interview.

Interestingly, the need to include extremist voices in mediated debates and the argument that inclusion leads to opposition to and condemnation of extremism, was echoed and magnified by journalists and commentators in competing legacy media. One political editor and commentator, for example, stressed the democratic ideals of journalism by noting, "It is seldom that the strengths of freedom of speech and democracy are so clearly demonstrated as when extremists are marginalized, and their message torn apart in public" (*Aftenposten*, August 26, 2014).

In terms of the role of the news media, commentators and journalists invoked the normative democratic foundations of journalism. They underscored the journalistic duty to furnish information about extremism and warn the public; to hold extremists to account; and to provide an open forum for debating extremism. Those expressing this view asserted the necessity to invite extremist voices into mainstream news discourses and to expose, debate, and combat them together to defend shared democratic values. Moreover, they stressed the clarifying and unifying effects of the interview, pointing out that it forced the (Muslim) population to firmly counter and condemn extreme Islamist views and mark the boundaries between extremists and the population of Muslims in general, to restrain the influence of extremist groups, and limit prejudice against Muslims in the majority population.

The Perspective of Sources: Polarizing and Mobilizing Effects

In the days following the interview, several external sources were invited to comment on the views advanced in the interview as well as the decision to publish them. The number of sources invited to comment on the interview indicates that VG actively worked to preempt criticism and foster debate about the role of journalism and the legitimate boundaries of democratic public debate. Similarly, various (elite) sources were invited to comment on the interview in the other outlets analyzed (including politicians, nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, initiators of a protest march against extremism, researchers, and unaffiliated Muslim sources). In contrast to internal political commentators, who all put forth arguments justifying the need to publish and expose extreme views, the interviewed external sources provided arguments both for and against the inclusion of extremist actors' views in mainstream public debate—but with emphasis on perspectives foregrounding potentially negative consequences of granting extremists news attention (including polarizing and mobilizing effects) and calling for a cautious and critical approach.

In particular, Muslim spokespersons, think tanks, and commentators warned that news media attention could contribute to the spread and consolidation of extreme views and could have a polarizing effect on the political climate—among the general population and "extreme factions" (VG, August 17, 2014). They warned the legacy media against being exploited for propaganda purposes and "strengthen[ing] the aura that these extremists have created for themselves" (VG, August 17, 2014). Leaders of an ethnic minority think tank warned that the interview, which was published in full, had provided the extremist group, The Prophet's Ummah, an online manifesto fit for propaganda and the recruitment of "young, identity-seeking youth" (VG, August 17, 2014). The criticism of the interview also concerned the form and format of

the interview, stressing that the interview lacked contextualization and critical questions—particularly the fact that the extremist spokesperson was allowed to claim that he spoke "on behalf of the majority of Norwegian Muslims" without being countered (VG, August 17, 2014). In sum, these voices highlighted that, by granting extended space to extreme Islamist voices, the news media contributed to the spread of propaganda that was used in recruitment efforts and to a more polarized political climate, with negative consequences for the Muslim population.

Similar to the position of commentators and journalists, the need for public confrontation and deliberation to prevent and counter radicalization and extremism and to actively defend and mark out core democratic values was a recurrent argument among sources. These calls emphasize the need to demarcate boundaries between the majority society and those extremists who break with fundamental values of tolerance and freedom. According to this position, it is not enough to engage in dialogue with extremists; they must be confronted and denounced in public, and the legacy news media is vital in this endeavor, by both exposing the extremists and providing a platform for unified condemnation. An example of this view expresses that the Islamists are "totally isolated from the Muslim community. Only then you have marked a boundary!" (*Dagsavisen*, August 21, 2014). While some highlighted condemnation as a societal responsibility, others presented it as mainly a responsibility of the Muslim community. The latter position was substantiated in several ways. Some noted that Muslims need to confront the views expressed in the interview to demonstrate that the views are not representative of Islam and Muslims as well as to prevent extremists from "seizing" the power to define Islam.

One notable exception to the position calling for "firm condemnation" was the umbrella organization for Islamic religious communities and organizations, which highlighted the need for dialogue and questioned the extent to which condemnation was the most constructive way to combat extremism (TV2, August 22, 2014). This perspective was, however, unanimously condemned by journalists, politicians, and nongovernmental organizations, who repeatedly called for the organization to distance itself from extremists.

Among established expert news sources such as politicians, there was strong support for the inclusion of extremist actors and views into legacy news debates, echoing the dominant journalist position. These experts pointed out that inclusion provided information, opened the discussion to countervoices, and gave society the opportunity to confront extremist ideas, arguing that "anti-democratic utterances are part of democratic deliberation. And by seeing clearly that these attitudes exist, you also understand that they need to be combatted" (VGTV, August 17, 2014).

The Perspective of Online Commenters:
Punishment, Media Critique, and Anti-Islamism

The normative and legal boundaries of free speech, including the limits of legacy news discourses, were widely discussed in VG's online comments section. Commenters presented different arguments for and against the inclusion of extremist views in mainstream public debates and discussed the consequences of differing practices on the existence, countering, and potential amplification of views deemed extremist. In debating the role of the news media in dealing with extremism, online commenters focused on the broader

consequences of specific representations of extremism and provided analyses and explanations of why specific actors and topics gained media attention and were reported in specific ways.

Online commenters provided arguments for and against the journalistic publication of the extremist viewpoints. Those in favor of giving voice to extremists largely concurred with the argument in editorial debates about documenting and exposing the extremism. The comments section also contained a strong call for a more restrictive practice, with some plainly stating that the media should silence extremist voices. Others expressed their position by pointing to the possible broader consequences of inclusion and media attention. Several commenters pointed to the possible negative consequences relating to the consolidation of extreme political ideas. These commenters warned of the risk of contributing to legitimizing, magnifying, and granting status to marginal and potentially dangerous extremist opinions by granting them coverage. Mirroring the metadebates in the news articles and opinion pieces, part of the media criticism put forth by the online commenters concerned the form of the interview rather than the decision to publish it per se. They criticized the interview for its lack of critical questions and noted that, while it may be acceptable to publish interviews with deviant political actors, this requires specific journalistic skills in collecting and editing information, which VG reporters lacked. These criticisms occasionally extended beyond the interview to criticisms of Norwegian journalists in general for being uncritical, incompetent, and lazy.

The online debates about the Hussain interview often extended to discussions on the limits of free speech. Online commenters advanced a range of views, from full free speech to wide-reaching sanctions and limitations of public debate. In contrast to the editorial metacoverage, severe legal restrictions, including expulsion and restrictions on freedom of religion, were frequently brought up as solutions to the Islamist extremist position represented by The Prophet's Ummah. A number of online commenters argued that the views expressed in the interview should result in incarceration and/or expulsion. The pro-expulsion arguments were generally met with countervoices pointing out that Hussain was a Norwegian citizen and, thus, could not be expelled.

Online commenters engaged in broader debates about journalistic autonomy, the "representativeness" of legacy news coverage, and its possible effects on the political climate. This strand of debate variously criticized journalists and media reporting for being biased. Some explained these perceived imbalances by pointing to news conventions and financial considerations of the news media as well as the perceived (leftist/liberal) political leaning of journalists, which, some argued, produced bias in journalistic output and mainstream public discourse more broadly. Among the online commenters, the normative journalistic ideal of balance was evoked in two critical discourses that criticized the interview from different political positions.

First, the commenters criticized the news media for including and giving attention to extreme Islamists while failing to include and report on "moderate" Muslims. This line of argument emphasized that the inclusion of extreme Islamist voices could have a negative impact on the political climate by contributing to (reinforcing) prejudice against Muslims and leading to an increasingly polarized and hostile political climate. Some commenters explicitly related this perceived imbalance to commercial news logics—the news media's tendency to focus on the extreme and dramatic rather than the mundane to gain audience attention. Some online commenters further noted that the news media had a responsibility to "restore" balance by including Muslim and other voices that could counter and criticize extremist views.

Second, several online commenters criticized legacy news media for including extreme Islamist voices while excluding and silencing voices that were critical of Islam and/or immigration policies. Commenters substantiated this claim by noting the tendency to delete online comments that were critical of Islam or immigration policies, whereas the opinions of "extreme Islamists" were included in editorial content, something that was perceived as an editorial double standard. Others saw this alleged imbalance as resulting from a general leftist political journalistic bias that contributes to muting voices that are critical of Islam. In contrast, others commenting from an anti-immigration standpoint found it encouraging that VG finally exposed "the dark side of Islam."

Calls to confront extremist views were also a prominent feature of the debate in the online comments, echoing the call to mobilization found in the editorial metadebates. Diverging from the elite positions calling for Norwegian society to mobilize against extremism, commenters emphasized that Muslims needed to oppose, confront, and dissociate themselves from extreme Islamism. The core message in these comments was typically that Muslims need to confront the views of extreme Islamists in order to demonstrate that these views are not representative of Islam and Muslims in general. Thus, dissociation was presented as a necessary symbolic action to demarcate the boundaries between the majority of Muslims and extreme Islamists. These strands of debate typically resulted in longer discussions about Islam and the relationship between Islam and extremism, and the commenters in these debates typically pointed to Islam as the cause of extremism, questioning the extent to which there was indeed a difference between the views of the majority of Muslims and those of groups like The Prophet's Ummah.

Concluding Discussion: Unification and New Demarcations

Through an investigation of metadebates following a critical incident, this article analyzes the ways in which actors internal and external to journalism engage in negotiating, criticizing, and defending the boundaries of journalism and appropriate public debate. Beyond the particularities of the case, the analysis offers insights into how legacy media serve as both arena and actor in contemporary boundary struggles, and how these symbolic boundaries are negotiated and redrawn after critical events. It proposes a temporal model of how the legacy media maintain or regain control, and even consolidate their dominant position, when they open up and initiate metadebates about editorial decisions (see Figure 1).
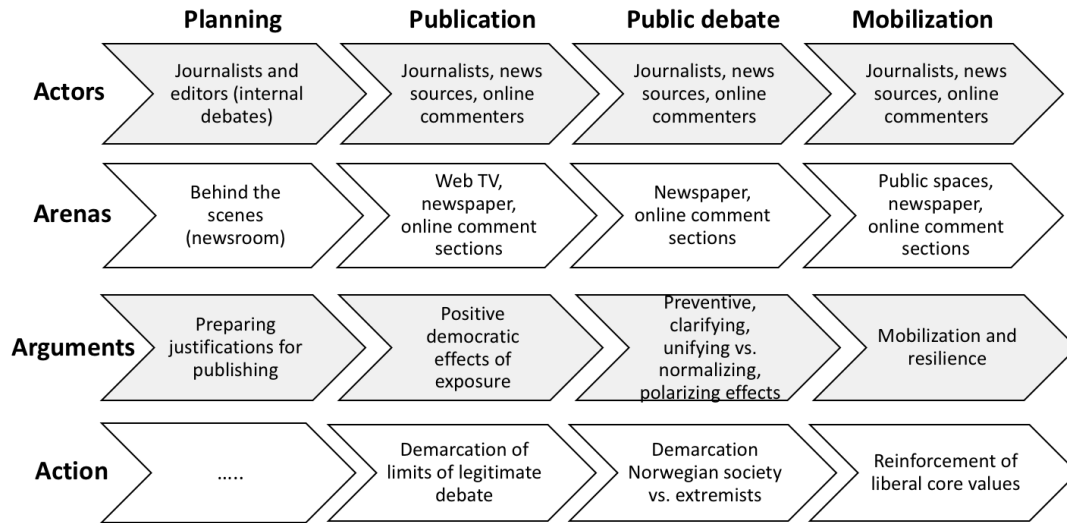
	Planning	Publication	Public debate	Mobilization
Actors	Journalists and editors (internal debates)	Journalists, news sources, online commenters	Journalists, news sources, online commenters	Journalists, news sources, online commenters
Arenas	Behind the scenes (newsroom)	Web TV, newspaper, online comment sections	Newspaper, online comment sections	Public spaces, newspaper, online comment sections
Arguments	Preparing justifications for publishing	Positive democratic effects of exposure	Preventive, clarifying, unifying vs. normalizing, polarizing effects	Mobilization and resilience
Action	…..	Demarcation of limits of legitimate debate	Demarcation Norwegian society vs. extremists	Reinforcement of liberal core values

Figure 1. Temporal model of the mediated negotiations of the boundaries of public debate.

The analysis indicates that journalistic metadiscourses across legacy news outlets defended the publication of the interview by stressing legacy media's democratic duty to expose, prevent, and combat extremism. The journalists' metadiscourse represents an indirect defense of the publication, as it addressed the positive effects of exposing the Islamist extremist position of The Prophet's Ummah: It had a preventive effect by giving the group's spokesperson an opportunity to explain the group's views on its ideal state, democracy, and violence. It had a clarifying effect by forcing the Muslim population in general—represented in the news media by leaders, organizations, and unaffiliated individuals—to position themselves in contrast and public opposition to the Prophet's Ummah. And it had a cohesive/unifying effect whereby the news media called on core societal values and assumed a leading role in presenting common, unifying values that contrast with those of the deviant other. The extremist was not confronted during the studio interview, but the legacy news organizations encouraged and argued for broad and vocal mobilization against The Prophet's Ummah in the aftermath of the publication.

The potential negative effects of publishing the interview—such as the normalization of extremist positions—were systematically downplayed by journalists. In essence, the legacy media invited experts into the debate and provided an arena for metajournalistic discussions. Concurrently, journalists, commentators, and editors across media outlets became dominant actors in this debate. They collectively used the interview as an opportunity to stress the demarcation between core democratic values and extremist Islamists and to highlight the central role of the news media in exposing extremists, facilitating public condemnation and counterresponses. In sum, journalists and commentators collectively foregrounded the democratic importance of the news media and their own authority and competence in contributing positively to the upholding of democratic ideals such as public deliberation and safety.

Simultaneously, societal mobilization against extremism relatively quickly became the focus of the public debate that followed the interview, thereby undermining further discussion of the journalistic decision to publish extremist views. Some commentators even cited the public mobilization as evidence that the exposure of extremists indeed facilitates public mobilization against threats to security and democracy. This position was amplified by interviews with politicians and other elite representatives. Overall, the legacy media and political elites framed the debate as a boundary contestation between legitimate expressions and values—represented by Norwegian institutions and citizens, including moderate Muslims—and illegitimate expressions of extremism. By taking on the role of defenders of liberal democratic society against the threat of extremism, the legacy media claimed a position as the primary arena and actor in maintaining communal solidarity, resilience, and cohesion (Alexander, 2004, 2011; Enjolras, 2017; Schudson, 2011; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2018; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). Extremists such as The Prophet's Ummah represent the antithesis and direct threat to liberal and democratic higher values.

Rather than simply being talked about and prescribed particular subject positions, Muslim commentators and news sources took an active role as key participants in the boundary negotiations following the publication of the interview. At the same time, these boundary demarcations ascribe the general Muslim population an ambivalent position, demanding that they actively take a stand and specify which side of the symbolic border they belong on. Thus, the mediated emphasis on the symbolic boundaries has both unifying and dividing effects: It unifies by drawing the boundary of legitimacy between "extremists" and the broader society, and it divides by defining Muslims as potential members of illegitimate out-groups. Further, it has social consequences for the Muslim minority population as it pressures them to take a public and active stand against extremism.

While political elites generally argued in line with journalists and editors, highlighting the positive effects of including extremist voices in the public domain, the majority of ethnic minority sources invited to counter, contextualize, and analyze the Islamist statements warned against allowing extremists to become the symbolic representatives of all Muslims in Norway. In particular, experts on extremism and those representing Muslim and ethnic minority organizations warned that the interview could consolidate extremist views rather than combat them and could amplify threats, insecurity, stereotypes, and prejudice. This critical position is also prominent in much of the academic literature on extremism, warning against normalizing and magnifying extremist positions (see Cottle, 2006; Epkins, 2017; Nacos, 2016; Phillips, 2018). Of the sources invited to comment in the news media, Muslim and minority interests were the most vocal critics of the interview performance, criticizing VG for being passive and for lacking necessary context. Although these critics first engaged in media criticism, they gradually became more involved in the mobilization against The Prophet's Ummah and the public confrontation against the views it represents. As potential outsiders, it has become vital for Muslim and ethnic minority representatives to explicitly condemn the Islamist extremists—to mark the boundaries between religious extremism and the democratic ideals shared by the majority.

The boundary contestation over journalism and free speech was both more explicit and more multidimensional in the readers' comments. Whereas the legacy media debates largely drew a symbolic boundary between extremism and liberal values, news audiences commenting online were notably more critical of the legacy news media in general and the decision to publish the interview in particular. In contrast

to the editorial coverage, the comments sections included many generic discussions on media sensationalism and bias that were spurred by concrete criticisms of the interview. In addition to the critique by minority representatives in the editorial coverage, many notably anti-immigration voices blamed the legacy media for its liberal bias. In contrast to the debate among journalists and news sources, the online commenters argued in favor of restricting the boundaries of free speech through legal sanctions against extremist utterances. According to this position, extremists should be silenced or sanctioned by law, indirectly indicating that the responsibility for countering extremism goes beyond editorial decisions, press ethics, journalistic norms, and public deliberation. Whereas most of the news sources engaging in the metadebates accepted the role of the media and public communication in countering extremism, the audience criticized this position and called for stronger measures. The debate in the comments section first illustrates the boundary negotiations resulting from including ideas and actors deemed illegitimate in legacy news media and how audiences actively partake in the construction and reinforcement of boundaries of legitimate debate. Second, the comments sections bring to light the, for some, blurred boundaries between Muslims and extremists, thus illustrating the potential polarizing effects of inclusion. Third, at a more general level, the analysis demonstrates how comments sections have become major platforms for alternative, audience-initiated, bottom-up media criticism in the digital, networked age (cf. Carlson, 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Jenkins & Tandoc, 2017). The analysis here further illuminates the complexity of contemporary boundary struggles (Alexander, 2011; Enjolras, 2017; Midtbøen et al., 2017), even when media and political elites—the institutions with the power to define the limits of media debates and free speech—are strikingly univocal.

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