

Freedom of expression or censorship of antisemitic hate speech?

Editorial and audience perspectives on comment moderation in far-right alternative media

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Abstract

Taking the dilemma between freedom of expression and censorship of antisemitic hate speech as a point of departure, this article explores how three prominent and controversial Norwegian far-right alternative media perceive and perform comment moderation and how editorial and audience perspectives on the issue correspond. Based on a critical discourse analysis of interviews with key staff members and a strategic selection of comment sections, the article demonstrates how both moderators and debaters understand the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate expressions and how transgressive content should be dealt with. The article argues that when it comes to regulating comment sections, these oppositional media actors are not so alternative after all. The study illustrates how comment moderation is crucial for all actors who seek to obtain or protect their legitimacy, regardless of their (counter-) position in the public sphere. While there is widespread agreement on antisemitic hate speech as illegitimate, there is, however, more tolerance for generalising statements about Muslims and immigrants, which underpins these actors' antagonism towards these groups.

KEYWORDS

far right, alternative media, comment moderation, online comments, editorial control, audience participation, hate speech, antisemitism, freedom of expression, anti-Muslim prejudice

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the far right has undergone an ideological development in which freedom of expression and opposition to antisemitism have emerged as two crucial but conflicting values. The starting point for this study is an observation of an ongoing debate across the three most prominent alternative media in Norway, which, in addition to being controversial actors, can be characterised as “anti-Islamic” and part of the transnational far-right political landscape (Berntzen, 2020). All three sites have published editorials condemning antisemitism, arguing that it is illegitimate and harmful. However, this does not mean anti-Jewish expressions have been eradicated, nor is there agreement on how to deal with such views. In 2018, the editor-in-chief of *Resett* discussed the dilemma between advocating for unlimited freedom of expression and censorship of antisemitic hate speech, arguing that “the principle of an open comment section” is more important. He further encouraged debaters to “take extra good care of the Jews in Norway” and to contribute to constructive discussions without making antisemitic remarks since the Jewish minority is threatened from many sides (Lurås, 2018). Shortly after, *Rights.no* harshly criticised *Resett* for lack of moderation and for allowing “grotesque Jew-hatred” and support for Nazism in their comment sections (Storhaug, 2018). In 2019, *Document* also criticised *Resett* for giving a platform to people promoting antisemitism and Holocaust denial, both online and at a public debate meeting, arguing that antisemites have the same view on free speech as Islamists (Rustad, 2019).

With this debate as a backdrop, the present article explores the arguments used and the tensions that arise when the dilemma between defending freedom of expression and denouncing antisemitism is dealt with by editorial staff and discussed by audience members in the comment sections of these alternative media. This is of importance because, in addition to informing discussions on where and how antisemitic hate speech is expressed in a fragmented and digital public sphere, this case can illuminate how alternative media, which by definition “represent a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective” to the public discourse and the dominant mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862), perceive and perform comment moderation in general. While many studies have demonstrated why and how mainstream media handle their comment sections (e.g. Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015; Singer et al., 2011), less attention has been paid to how this unfolds in alternative media. Examining whether, why and how new media actors control the debates they facilitate is essential for understanding the wider dynamics of the digital public sphere. Given their stated editorial

position on antisemitism, the alternative media investigated can function as gatekeepers who can prevent this specific type of hate speech.

Far-right alternative media represent an interesting case because compared to the mainstream media they criticise, they presumably have different understandings of where the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable should be set. Of particular interest is that these sites may attract highly diverse audiences, from mainstream and immigration-critical to extremist voices. Since the dilemma in question has sparked debates among readers, this case can also provide valuable insights into the relationship between the editorial line of such media and their audiences. While studies of editorial control in mainstream media have shown how moderators and participants in such online debates have different expectations of how moderation should be carried out (Løvlie et al., 2018; Robinson, 2010), research on audience participation in far-right alternative media is scarce (Holt, 2020). Taking the dilemma between freedom of expression and censorship of antisemitism as a point of departure, this article contributes to this literature by posing the following research questions:

1. How does far-right alternative media perceive and perform comment moderation?
2. How do audience perspectives correspond with editorial views?

The overall aim is to contribute with knowledge on the different positions and arguments used about comment moderation of hate speech across and within alternative media, which in recent years have influenced the digital public sphere (Holt, 2020; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021). Of particular interest is whether the arguments reflect interventionist or non-interventionist approaches to comment moderation (Ihlebak et al., 2013; Løvlie et al., 2018). Based on a critical discourse analysis of interviews with key editorial staff members and a selection of comment sections that address the dilemma outlined above, the article demonstrates how both facilitators of and participants in the comment sections in these alternative media understand the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate expressions, how transgressive content should be dealt with, and the risks associated with specific approaches to comment moderation. The article argues that when it comes to regulating comment sections, these oppositional media actors are not so alternative after all, as the findings illustrate how comment moderation is crucial for all actors who seek to obtain or protect

their legitimacy, regardless of their (counter-) position in the public sphere. However, while there is widespread agreement on the illegitimacy of antisemitic hate speech, there is more tolerance for negative generalising statements about Muslims and immigrants, which underpins their antagonism towards these groups.

The far right's liberal turn and changed views on Jews

The *far right* is an umbrella term for a variety of political actors, which main common denominator is that they promote a worldview based on nativism, the idea that states should be populated by the native in-group and that alien out-groups pose a threat to the homogenous nation state (Mudde, 2007). While the *extreme* right is profoundly anti-democratic and may support or use violence, the *radical* right operates within a democratic framework but opposes key liberal democratic values, such as political pluralism and minority rights. Another but also partly overlapping distinction can be made between those who see Jews as the main threat and those who are antagonistic to Islam and Muslims. However, the boundaries between ideological camps can be fluid, particularly on digital platforms where different audiences meet.

Considering that far-right ideology historically has been characterised by authoritarianism, it may seem paradoxical that large parts of the far right in Western Europe have taken an ostensibly liberal turn over the last few decades. This is linked to what Berntzen (2020, p. 1) labelled “the anti-Islamic turn and expansion of the far right”, in which there has been an ideological transformation where *race* has been replaced by *culture*; Jews have been replaced by Muslims as the predominant enemy, and authoritarianism has been replaced by a “semi-liberal equilibrium”, referring to how far-right actors have adopted liberal positions on many issues – such as gender equality and LGBTQ rights – to denounce Islam (Berntzen, 2020). As part of this liberal discourse, far-right actors portray themselves as the true defenders of free speech in a world where this profound democratic freedom is threatened by “the elite”, the political left, and political correctness (e.g. Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Moffitt, 2017). Studies have demonstrated how the Muhammad cartoon controversy (Yılmaz, 2011) and the terrorist attack targeting satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (Castelli Gattinara, 2017) functioned as key events used by far-right actors to highlight freedom of expression as a fundamental Western value that is incompatible with Islam. A main argument is that freedom of expression should be as broad as possible – or even absolute (Moffitt, 2017).

Another feature of this ideological development is the changed view of Jews. Historically, hostility towards Jews has been a core feature of far-right ideology. Now, however, it is primarily neo-Nazis who promote antisemitic ideas – most notably conspiracies about Jewish power and Holocaust denial (e.g. Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2021). Following the discredit of antisemitism in the public sphere after the Holocaust, other far-right actors have largely distanced themselves from Nazism and antisemitism to reach a wider audience (Jackson & Feldman, 2014). Some even embrace the Jewish minority, support Israel, and have adopted a critical position towards antisemitism. This “anti-antisemitism” may serve as a way of distancing themselves from Nazism, as well as fending off Muslim immigration, which is claimed to be threatening the security of the Jewish population (Kahmann, 2017). Moreover, support for Israel, Jews and Judaism is often linked to a worldview in which Judeo-Christian values are exalted and equated with Western values that are in conflict with Islam and Muslims (Berntzen, 2020; Kahmann, 2017). Although one can argue that the change in far-right views on Jews is strategic, it may also be a result of genuine ideological differences since the far right is not one unified bloc. The aim here is not to determine the motivations behind this change but rather to scrutinise how an anti-antisemitic editorial position affects how far-right alternative media perceive and perform comment moderation, as well as the arguments used for and against censorship of antisemitism among their audiences, who may or may not share their views.

Audience participation and comment moderation in mainstream and alternative media

Comment sections provide an increased opportunity for citizens to engage in public discussions (Ihlebak & Krumsvik, 2015) and for interactivity between news producers and their audiences (Larsson, 2011). Facilitation of online debates has, from early on, been motivated by democratic ideals about deliberative participation and by financial incentives (Reich, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011). While concerns for hate speech and harmful content have led many news organisations to strictly regulate or remove their comment sections, they are still offered by alternative media, but research on the moderation policies and practices of such actors is limited.

Studies on mainstream media have demonstrated that the motivations behind comment moderation may vary. As a way of facilitating democratic discussions, conducting content moderation may be a moral duty. Depending on a country's

legislation, preventing hate may also be a legal obligation (Ihlebak & Krumsvik, 2015; Singer et al., 2011). Considering how incivility and hate speech can damage the credibility and commercial interests of actors who facilitate online discussions, handling such content may also be strategically important (Anderson et al., 2016; Reich, 2011). Since alternative media are in opposition to mainstream media, it is not obvious whether these actors feel the same responsibility towards dealing with hate speech. When it comes to far-right alternative media specifically, research has demonstrated that they criticise the established press for being biased, elitist, leftist and politically correct (Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2019).

When analysing how media actors perceive and perform comment moderation, it is useful to distinguish between interventionist and non-interventionist strategies (Ihlebak et al., 2013). While an interventionist approach indicates a high level of editorial control and may involve identification requirements and active regulation of content, a non-interventionist approach implies that the media in question perform as little editorial control as possible, based on the ideal of comment sections as a free marketplace of ideas (Løvlie et al., 2018). How these strategies play out in practice is context-dependent, and they should be seen as opposite ends of a continuum rather than two fixed positions. Studies on comment moderation by mainstream media have demonstrated how moderation practices are often based on guidelines that determine what type of content is unwanted and how it should be handled (Ihlebak & Krumsvik, 2015; Reich, 2011). A key question for all moderators is where boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable should be set. Where the boundaries are drawn is likely to vary, depending on the position of the media actors in the public sphere and what they consider uncivil and harmful.

The participating audience may also have different views on where boundaries should be drawn. While the audience of alternative media comprises user groups with different motivations (Schwarzenegger, 2021) who may engage in varying ways (Larsson, 2011), the focus here is on active participants who write comments. Studies on participation and editorial control in mainstream media have highlighted a certain tension between media professionals and audiences concerning questions about the deliberative value, quality and degree of openness in participatory services (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Ihlebak & Krumsvik, 2015; Robinson, 2010). Although comment moderation is seen as valuable and necessary by many, a study by Løvlie, Ihlebak and Larsson (2018) showed that commenters who have been moderated are critical of comment moderation, which may be due to lack of transparency in the

moderation process or that those with non-interventionist attitudes also have a tendency towards discussing controversial topics with a confrontational style, lack of digital literacy or understanding of editorial policies.

When it comes to audiences of far-right alternative media, studies have indicated that users are motivated by scepticism and mistrust of mainstream media, particularly regarding news coverage about immigration and Islam (Noppari et al., 2019; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2020). Given that the audience of such media believes that the issues that occupy them are silenced in public, it is not unreasonable to assume that many will support a non-interventionist approach to moderation. Moreover, considering how far-right actors are strong defenders of free speech, comment moderation may be seen as a threat to this freedom.

Data and method

The cases investigated are the three most-read alternative media in Norway, regardless of political leaning: *Reset*, *Document* and *Rights.no* (see Table 1 for an overview of sites and key characteristics). Although the backgrounds for their establishment are different, the sites can be characterised as alternative media due to their self-ascribed oppositional role in the media landscape (Ihlebak & Nygaard, 2021). Ideologically, they are similar, focusing particularly on the negative aspects of immigration and Islam. All three sites have published editorials that condemn antisemitism. Within media studies, these types of actors have been labelled “right-wing” or “immigration critical” alternative media (Holt, 2020; Ihlebak & Nygaard, 2021) or “right-wing digital news” (Heft et al., 2020). Within political sociology, however, such actors are considered to be part of the far right due to their support for nativism and exclusionary views on Islam and Muslims (Berntzen, 2020). Although they might oppose the “far right” label, it is more precise and essential for this study to place them within this ideological landscape.

Site	Established	Weekly readership (%) ¹	Commenting rules	Log-in required for commenting
<i>Document</i>	2003 – as a blog	7	“We do not accept statements that are obviously spam, obscene, racist or that in other ways are a violation of Norwegian law or a minimum of common decency.”	Yes
<i>Reset</i>	2017 – as an alternative news site	8	“Dehumanisation, personal attacks, incitement, threats and incitement to violence, war rhetoric, spamming, trolling, complaints about moderation and derailment of the debate are not allowed. Normal courtesy is encouraged.”	Yes
<i>Rights.no (Human Rights Service)</i>	2001 – as a think tank	5	“When commenting, you accept our debate rules. We expect a serious debate without personal attacks. HRS reserves the right to moderate and remove inappropriate comments.”	Yes

Table 1: Overview of sites and key characteristics

In the Norwegian context, the media actors examined are considered to be controversial and have been the subject of much debate, including how they portray immigrants and Muslims and the lack of regulation in their comment sections (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2022; Nygaard, 2020).² Concerning regulatory frameworks, it is worth mentioning the Norwegian Media Liability Act, which applies to all media that regularly produce and publish news, debates or other content of public interest. It states that editors may be held responsible for illegal user-generated content (e.g. threats and hate speech), and if the media has rules for user-generated content, they must provide information about the rules

and how they are enforced. The commenting rules of the alternative media under study are presented above (see Table 1). Also relevant is the Code of Ethics for the Norwegian Press, which is a self-regulatory framework that is supervised by the Norwegian Press Council (PFU) and applies to members of the Association of Norwegian Editors. Since the editor of *Document* became a member in 2018, they must act accordingly, which implies responsibility for removing user-generated content that is not in compliance with the ethical code.³ *Resett* and *Rights.no* also claim to follow the Code of Ethics, although they are not formally members of this system.

In the analysis, the aim was to identify the different positions and arguments about comment moderation. To include both editorial and audience perspectives, this study is based on two types of data. First, semi-structured interviews with representatives of the alternative media, including editors and main moderators (N = 5, see Table 2 for an overview).⁴ Although the number of interviewees is small, they are considered key informants, as they are the only ones in the Norwegian context who can provide information – from an editorial perspective – on how this type of alternative media perceives and performs comment moderation. The informants were asked about their perceptions of antisemitism in Norway, how they deal with antisemitism in their comment sections, their moderation policies and practices in general and how they perceive freedom of expression in this context. Although the focus was on moderating antisemitic hate speech specifically, it was also an ambition to examine perspectives on comment moderation more generally. Second, the empirical material includes a strategic selection of one comment section from each site that addresses the dilemma of interest. The selected comment sections contain the reactions to the editorials mentioned in the introduction, which have been published on each site. These comments (N = 561) represent the views of active audiences across the sites, which can give insight into whether and how audience perspectives correspond with editorial views. The comments were collected on 10 and 12 May 2021, prior to the interviews, which were conducted in June and July 2021.⁵

Alternative media site	Position of the informant	Interview conducted by
<i>Document</i>	Chief editor	Video call
<i>Resett</i>	Chief editor	Video call
<i>Resett</i>	Head of moderators	Video call
<i>Rights.no</i>	Information manager	Video call
<i>Rights.no</i>	Main moderator	E-mail

Table 2: Overview of informants

Analytically, this study was inspired by the discourse-historical approach (DHA), a variant of critical discourse analysis that is interdisciplinary, problem-oriented and context-oriented and has a special focus on the historical embedding and change of language (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The DHA was developed to analyse the emergence of antisemitism in public discourses in post-war Austria but is now used to analyse ideology, power and discriminatory language of all kinds. Of particular relevance here is the text or discourse immanent critique, a specific aspect of the DHA that aims to discover inconsistencies, (self)-contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in text or discourse. As a first step, the analytical questions proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p. 32) were adjusted and used to conduct an exploratory close reading of the transcribed interviews and the selected comment sections:

- How are freedom of expression and antisemitism referred to separately and in relation to each other?
- What characteristics are attributed to freedom of expression and (censorship of) antisemitism, respectively?
- What arguments are employed?
- From what perspective are the arguments expressed?
- Are the statements articulated explicitly or implicitly?

The questions served as guidelines to identify the different positions and arguments used regarding the dilemma between (absolute) freedom of expression and censorship of antisemitism.

Subsequently, the interviews and comment sections were coded using the NVivo software for qualitative research. For both types of data, the coding process was hermeneutic and recursive, and the categorisation of positions and arguments was informed by previous research addressing the liberal turn of far-right ideology, perspectives on why and how mainstream media organisations perform comment moderation and the tensions that may arise between facilitators and participants in online debates. The overall aim was to disclose whether editorial perspectives and audience perspectives, respectively, correspond with an interventionist or a non-interventionist approach to comment moderation and whether and how the arguments for and against comment moderation comprise normative, strategic or legal considerations. Another overall aim was to uncover any inconsistencies, (self)-contradictions or paradoxes that might occur when dealing with and discussing the dilemma in question, both within and across the

alternative media and between their editorial policies and their audiences.

The examples of comments have been translated, cut and in some cases slightly adjusted by the author so the study is in accordance with the Norwegian Personal Data Act and the national ethical guidelines for internet research.

Perspectives on comment moderation in far-right alternative media

The first part of the analysis explores how far-right alternative media perceive and perform comment moderation, based on the perspectives of editorial staff members. The second part examines how audience perspectives correspond with editorial views.

Editorial perspectives: Consensus about interventionist strategies

Although they are strong advocates of freedom of expression, there is consensus among the editorial staff that comment moderation is necessary. This applies to antisemitic hate speech specifically but also to other types of harmful content. The arguments for why comment moderation is important and details on how it is practised are presented below.

The importance of comment moderation

In general, the editorial staff of the alternative media perceive freedom of expression to be restricted – in Norwegian society and in the media system. A key aim is to contribute to a more open public debate, particularly regarding topics such as immigration and Islam. When asked about the significance of comment sections, the arguments were similar across all three sites: they want to facilitate enlightening discussions and have a platform where many different voices can be heard, and some explicitly referred to how online debates have become an essential part of democracy. The information manager of *Rights.no* stated that it is “very important that people who feel powerless as citizens have arenas where they can express themselves”. The chief editor of *Document* criticised mainstream media for “failing its task” by closing their comment sections. This illustrates how these actors consider the facilitation of online discussions a social responsibility that the established media do not take seriously enough.

Despite concerns about limited freedom of expression, no editorial staff members argued that it should be absolute, at least not in the context of dealing with unwanted and harmful content – such as antisemitism – in their comment sections. An overall finding

is that the alternative media believe that they have a responsibility to conduct comment moderation, thus supporting interventionist strategies. The following quote from the main moderator of *Resett* illustrates this point: “I very much protect freedom of speech. But we have no obligation to publish.” Reflecting on how the dilemma between advocating for free speech and conducting moderation plays out on their platforms, she added, “I might say that I do not exactly protect it [free speech] in our comment sections”. The interviews also revealed that while *Resett* used to have what was described by the editor-in-chief as a “more idealistic approach”, both when it came to publishing a wide range of opinions and allowing “as much as possible” in the comment sections “as long as it was within the law”, in August 2019 they decided to regulate comment sections to a much greater extent. This illustrates a shift in *Resett*’s editorial line from a non-interventionist to an interventionist approach. As discussed in more detail below, this change probably reflects the need to protect their credibility. Also of relevance, although not explicitly mentioned in the interviews, is that *Resett*, around the time of this shift, had applied for membership in the Association of Norwegian Editors and was criticised for their lack of comment moderation (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2022).

Echoing studies on why mainstream media perform comment moderation, the arguments put forward by the representatives of the alternative media in question varied between normative, legal, and strategic considerations. Those who argued for comment moderation as a moral obligation emphasised the importance of preventing incivility and hate in society. A representative from *Rights.no* stated that they “do not want to be a place where people can spread hate and vulgarity”, and for them, antisemitism and racial discrimination “have nothing to do with free speech”. The main moderator of *Resett* emphasised that they have a great responsibility to help “combat the Jew-hatred that has arisen”, which she claimed was especially salient in Muslim communities. Although no one saw this as a particular concern in the comment sections, the argument about Muslim antisemitism as a significant problem was also mentioned by other informants throughout the interviews, which demonstrates how discussions about antisemitism substantiate their opposition towards Islam and Muslims.

The editor-in-chief of *Resett* focused more on strategic reasons for conducting moderation. In addition to briefly mentioning a legal responsibility and consideration for targeted individuals, he argued that it is mainly about “the reputation and image the public has of *Resett*”. Feedback from readers and the fact that people identify the

comment sections with their editorial line meant that the “idealistic” approach to moderation was no longer sustainable. The chief editor emphasised how their idealistic approach and view on free speech had a negative impact on their readership and finances and added, “We do not get around the fact that the comment sections must be handled”. The arguments put forward by the chief editor of *Document* were also about strategic considerations. He emphasised how they are “bearing the costs” when people write antisemitic or other types of harmful comments. As an example, he highlighted how “unpleasant” it was when it became publicly known that extreme-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik had posted comments on their site. Moreover, since becoming a member of professional press associations, it is important for *Document* to act in accordance with their ideals, which means that dealing with harmful comments is necessary (see Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2022).

Overall, this shows that despite a previous tension between the alternative media, there is now editorial consensus concerning how they perceive comment moderation, as they all expressed support for interventionist strategies. The next section provides details on what this approach entails when it comes to moderation of antisemitic hate speech specifically, as well as other types of content.

Policies and practices

Like mainstream media, the alternative media investigated have moderators who follow the comment sections closely to deal with unwanted and harmful content. Their moderation practices are informed by guidelines that are similar across the sites. Examples of what was claimed to be unacceptable include threats, unreasonable personal attacks, harassment, spam, and racism and hate speech against groups. Speaking in more general terms, the editor-in-chief of *Document* stressed, “We want people to think before they write and express themselves in a civilised language”. When asked about antisemitism in the comment sections, the interviewees acknowledged that it may occur, albeit to varying degrees, and emphasised that it is unacceptable to promote antisemitic ideas on their platforms. The most common practice when someone breaks the rules is to not approve comments for publication (on the websites) or to hide or delete comments (on Facebook). If someone crosses the line several times, they may be blocked.

When asked whether it is difficult to know where the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate content should be drawn, the interviewees recognised this as a recurring challenge. When asked specifically about antisemitism in this context, the informants said

that it is not particularly difficult to assess, even if it may be characterised by coded language or if the antisemitic message appears as an underlying idea. The informants expressed no tolerance for any statements that may be perceived as antisemitic. Such statements may, for instance, be conspiratorial ideas about Jewish power or someone questioning whether the Holocaust happened. The chief editor of *Resett* emphasised that since they rejected their “idealistic” approach, they now have “zero tolerance” for antisemitism. The chief editor of *Document* characterised antisemitism as “sui generis”, something so unique that there is no doubt about where “the red line” goes. In cases of doubt, the interviewees stated that it is better to delete such comments than to let them be. In sum, this indicates a relatively strict regulation of comment sections, particularly regarding statements that may be perceived as discriminatory or hostile towards Jews. It also shows how these actors can function as efficient gatekeepers who may contribute to the prevention of antisemitism in the digital public sphere.

Probing into the question of difficult boundaries, the interviews further disclosed that the argumentation is different when it comes to comments about other minorities. Despite having guidelines that define racism and hate speech against (all) specific groups as illegitimate, the editorial staff members expressed ambivalence and more tolerance regarding generalisations about immigrants and Muslims. To illustrate, the chief editor of *Resett* claimed, on the one hand, that they have become less tolerant when it comes to how Islam and Muslims are referred to in the comment sections, as it may be “difficult to distinguish between criticism of Islam and criticism of Muslims”. While criticism of Islam is considered legitimate, criticism of Muslims is, in principle, illegitimate. On the other hand, he also expressed ambiguity about whether this distinction really makes sense. The chief editor of *Document* similarly described it as “meaningless” to draw a specific line on what you can say when it comes to “the conflict between the West/Europe and Islam”. The information manager of *Rights.no* mentioned generalising allegations about Somalis as examples of comments they sometimes let through because “statistically, there are big problems among Somalis” and “not everyone is very good at making reservations” when writing a comment. Although the editorial line of the alternative media is based on an interventionist approach to comment moderation where all forms of hate speech are prohibited, this illustrates that their policies and practices are not consistent, particularly regarding groups that they are antagonistic towards.

Audience perspectives: Conflicting views on comment moderation

Regarding how audience members perceive the dilemma between free speech and censorship of antisemitism, an overall distinction can be made between those who believe that freedom of expression should have certain limits, which means that interventionist moderation strategies are considered necessary, and those who argue for unlimited freedom of expression and thus are critical of comment moderation. Both positions exist within and across the comment sections of the alternative media under study, which means that all three sites have been subject to praise and criticism for how they handle their comment sections. The arguments for and against comment moderation are presented next. Since the latter was more salient, these arguments are given more space.

Arguments for comment moderation

The supporters of an interventionist approach believe that freedom of expression is of major importance but maintain that it should have certain restrictions. The discussions include arguments that refer to the dilemma between freedom of expression and opposition to antisemitism in general and what it means for how online debates should be handled particularly. Many of these commenters have argued from a normative perspective in which antisemitism and Holocaust denial are considered illegitimate, evil, and harmful to society. The main argument is that certain types of political views should not be accepted, even within the framework of wide freedom of expression, and that antisemitism and Holocaust denial are clear examples of the unacceptable. The following statement illustrates this point: “We will stand on the barricades for freedom of expression, but that does not include defending hatred and lies.” Other commenters have emphasised that “Jew-haters, whether Islamists or Nazis, do not belong in civilised societies” and that antisemites and Holocaust deniers are “on the sideline” of what free speech is about. Consequently, they disqualify themselves from debates and should not be allowed to express themselves in the comment sections.

Another common argument is that the alternative media have no obligation to publish extreme voices, conspiracy theories or statements that contradict well-documented facts, such as the systematic killing of Jews during World War II. As one commenter has put it: “No one is entitled to have unhistorical chatter published” because it is up to the editor-in-chief of any news outlet to decide what to publish, and “that is how freedom of expression works”. Another debater has similarly stated that criticising *Reset*

for inviting right-wing extremists to debates is “not to gag freedom of expression, but rather to use it”. In this context, some have stressed that those who promote antisemitic and neo-Nazi views are free to establish their own platforms. Moreover, among those who believe that comment moderation is necessary, some explicitly argue from a strategic point of view. For instance, one commenter urged not to let “these people destroy the alternative media so that they end up as unreadable, poisoned sites for extremists”, which is claimed to be “the highest wish” among the political left and “old media”. Other commenters have referred to the acceptance of antisemitism in the comment sections as “too including” and as “self-harm”. Overall, this indicates an agreement between the editorial line of the alternative media in question and parts of their audiences regarding how they perceive comment moderation, especially when removing antisemitic content. However, many audience members were also highly critical of comment moderation. Their arguments are presented next.

Arguments against comment moderation

The supporters of a non-interventionist approach argue for freedom of expression as a fundamentally important liberal principle, which should be (almost) absolute and limited only in cases of threats or incitement to violence. Consequently, the non-interventionists across all alternative media sites have expressed support for how *Resett* performed comment moderation before tightening the rules. In addition to the overarching main argument about the value of absolute free speech, these debaters argue for the importance of an open debate and point to the risk associated with blurry boundaries, which can backfire if freedom of expression is restricted.

In discussions on whether antisemitic or neo-Nazi beliefs should be allowed in the comment sections, those who support the non-interventionist position emphasise the value of exposing different opinions, no matter how incorrect or illegitimate they are. A common statement in this regard is that “we should not censor voices we do not like”. The main argument is that debate and counterarguments are better than censorship and no-platforming, which are considered undemocratic and illiberal measures. In this context, some commenters expressed concern about extreme voices moving to closed platforms, where they would not meet any resistance. A recurring argument is that it is bad to censor conspiratorial and “paranoid” people because then they get their worldview confirmed. In a worst-case scenario, censorship can lead to something that is “more dangerous”. Other commenters argued that by allowing and exposing antisemites and Holocaust deniers in

the comment sections, it is likely that more people will become aware of what these actors stand for, and as a result, those who promote such illegitimate ideas make themselves irrelevant. As one commenter has put it: “Idiotic things like Holocaust denial cannot stand the light of day.”

A closer look at the arguments against censorship of comments revealed that these audience members are worried about what restrictions on freedom of expression may lead to – for society in general and for the alternative media actors in question. Many asked rhetorical questions about where the boundaries should be drawn and emphasised that it can be difficult to distinguish between hate speech (as defined by law) and criticism of religion – both in the case of Jews and Judaism and in the case of Muslims and Islam. A key argument is that it should be legitimate to criticise all religions and ethnic groups, including Jews, which the editorial line of the alternative media in question does not allow for. As for Holocaust denial, several debaters have pointed out that it should be legitimate to ask questions, even if it is a well-documented historical event – and a “problematic opinion”. The following comment illustrates this point: “If a specific topic gets special treatment, it becomes a slippery slope argument.” The overall message of the non-interventionists is that true freedom of speech can be achieved only if everyone can express their views on all types of issues.

These audience members further stressed that the arguments used in defence of comment moderation and censorship of antisemitism can just as easily be used by political opponents, mainstream media and the general public to silence alternative media and the people who share their views, particularly on issues such as Islam, immigration and racism. Commenting on the arguments used by *Document* in favour of comment moderation, one debater claimed, “You’re shooting yourself in the foot – with a shotgun”. Another commenter criticised *Rights.no* for their position on the issue by stating, “You are now using the same rhetoric as your opponents in the mainstream public”. An overarching argument is that there is a serious risk of hate speech legislation being abused, since “many people want criticism of Islam and the questioning of mass immigration to be illegal”. Consequently, these debaters argued that an interventionist approach to comment moderation will backfire and that the comment sections should be as open as possible with little or no editorial control.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that while the non-interventionists in the comment sections of *Document* and *Rights.no* show little tolerance for antisemitism and Holocaust denial, some of those who defended free speech in the comment section of *Resett* (before they changed the rules) did so because they also supported antisemitic

views. A meta debate about Jews and Judaism has also triggered conspiratorial ideas about Jewish power and influence in media and society at large. Some of these commenters questioned why it is illegal or illegitimate to “criticise” Jews, implicitly or explicitly arguing that powerful Jews are suppressing freedom of expression. Others have claimed that Jews undermine society by being responsible for “mass immigration” and “multiculturalism”, which is a common antisemitic trope among neo-Nazis. Consequently, this illustrates that a non-interventionist approach to comment moderation can attract and facilitate debaters who promote antisemitic and extremist views.

Conclusion

While comment sections certainly provide an increased opportunity for people to engage in public discussions and for interactivity between news producers and their audiences, they also pose a challenge to facilitators of such debates. This study has explored how far-right alternative media perceive and perform comment moderation and how audience perspectives correspond with editorial views. Taking the dilemma between two important but conflicting values – defence of freedom of expression and opposition to antisemitism – as a point of departure, the study has contributed with new insights into the positions and arguments used in debates about comment moderation across and within alternative media, which, in recent years, has influenced the digital public sphere (Holt, 2020; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021).

Despite being strong defenders of freedom of expression, which they believe is restricted in media and society, the editorial staff of the alternative media acknowledged that comment moderation is necessary. Mostly reflecting normative or strategic considerations, their arguments were similar to how mainstream media perceives the responsibility for handling online debates (Anderson et al., 2016; Ihlebæk et al., 2013; Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015; Singer et al., 2011). This article has thus argued that when it comes to regulating comment sections, these oppositional media actors are not so alternative after all. The findings illustrate that comment moderation is crucial for all actors who seek to obtain or protect their legitimacy, regardless of their (counter-) position in the public sphere. The wish to be taken seriously and to gain influence and legitimacy were also important motivations when two of the sites examined, *Document* and *Resett*, applied for membership in the Association of Norwegian Editors in 2018, thus seeking insider

status in the professional media landscape (see Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2022).

The main question is thus not whether interventions should happen at all but rather where the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable should be set. In the digital public sphere, negotiations of boundaries may take place on different levels – for instance, between the editorial line of the media in question and the wider public, between media actors and their loyal audiences and among different audience members. This study has shown that while there is a general agreement on the need for censoring violent rhetoric, which can be important to create distance to and prevent extremism, questions of what constitutes transgressive hate speech and how it should be handled have raised discussions and dilemmas. When it comes to antisemitism specifically, both editorial staff and most audience members described it as unacceptable. This points to a widespread agreement in the public sphere about antisemitism as a marker of a particularly illegitimate and harmful political stance, even among actors who criticise the media and the public discourse for being narrow and biased. Considering how the editorial staff expressed zero tolerance for any statements that may be perceived as antagonistic towards Jews, the study indicates how these alternative media can function as important and efficient gatekeepers for counteracting antisemitic hate speech, which appears to be increasing in the digital public sphere (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018). However, the removal of such content may cause dissatisfaction among their most active audience members since many of them emphasised freedom of expression as a more important value.

Regarding other types of discriminatory content, the study has demonstrated how the boundaries are blurrier. Although their guidelines prohibit all forms of hate speech, the editorial staff across all sites expressed more tolerance for negative, generalising comments about Muslims and immigrants. Furthermore, the argument about the importance of “criticising” Islam, Muslims and (mass) immigration occurred repeatedly among commenters. This points to a common understanding between the editorial line of the alternative media and their audiences concerning the legitimacy of antagonistic statements about these specific out-groups. Considering how prejudice against Muslims is significantly more widespread (34%) in the Norwegian population than prejudice against Jews (8%), allowing anti-Muslim content in the comment sections is probably less risky (Hoffmann & Moe (eds.), 2017).

The present study has some limitations, considering that it covered only a specific subset of alternative media in one country. Future research should investigate perceptions of moderation

policies and practices and the boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate across and within alternative media with different ideological leanings and across country-specific (digital) public spheres. Moreover, this study is based on interviews and a selection of comment sections, which means that the findings reflect the expressed views of editorial staff and a subset of the participating audience. Future studies should use other methodological approaches to provide more details on the relationship between policies and practices and to gain insights into the views of the less active audience members. Despite these limitations, this study provides important knowledge about the potential for the diffusion and prevention of different types of hate speech in a rapidly changing digital media landscape.

NOTES

¹ Weekly readership (%) from Newman et al. (2020).

² For more on organisational features and these actors' role in the Scandinavian media landscape, see Ihlebæk and Nygaard (2021). To place them within a broader national and transnational ideological context, see Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019).

³ See <https://presse.no/pfu/etiske-regler/vaer-varsom-plakaten/vvpl-engelsk/>. Since 2018, Document has been sanctioned 10 times, five of which were due to a lack of comment moderation. For PFU statistics, see https://presse.no/avansert-sok/?sft_redaksjon=document-no.

⁴ Due to one informant's wish for full anonymity, this interview was conducted by email. It was thus less extensive, and there was limited opportunity for follow-up questions, which probably had an impact on the scope and depth of the information given. The main moderator of *Document* never responded to interview requests.

⁵ All of the comment sections were publicly available at the time of data collection.

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