



DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND  
COMMUNICATION

# Democratic Erosion and the News Media

An Exploratory Case Study of Sweden  
and the Freedom of Religion

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the symptoms of early democratic erosion in the news media and the role the news media may play in the process. As of now, there has yet to be any contemporary research on that subject.

The thesis focuses on the process of democratic erosion within the aspect of civil liberties and how symptoms of early democratic erosion can be visible in the media. Through deductive reading of literature on democratic erosion and the normative roles of the news media in a healthy democracy, the thesis identifies potential drivers of early democratic erosion as jeopardizing civil liberties, especially those of minorities or a particular group. More specifically, the symptoms of early democratic erosion in the news media are the normalization of hostile discourse, the provision of a platform for anti-democratic ideas, the normalization of political intolerance, the targeting of one group in the news media and the use of propaganda or misinformation to manipulate the public. While the news media are not solely responsible for democratic erosion, it is found that they can either counteract or contribute to it. The news media contribute to the phenomenon by failing their normative roles in a democracy and undermining democratic values. This can have different dimensions, such as publishing anti-democratic discourse without challenging it or polarized presentation of political issues or minorities without providing alternative perspectives. Complicity of the news media, characterized by the news media simply echoing statements from political actors, is part of this failure and subsequently contributes to democratic erosion. However, the news media can also counteract democratic erosion by resisting such polarization, publishing fact-checked information, and challenging anti-democratic statements made by political actors. When the news media fulfill their normative roles dutifully, they can create an environment in which healthy discussion flourishes and minority voices are included equally, without hate speech and intolerant discourse dominating the public sphere. These results are generalizable to liberal democracies and highlight the importance of the news media adhering to their normative roles to safeguard and protect democracy.

To find out what these theorized symptoms and roles look like in reality, a case study of Sweden over the years 2016 to 2023 is conducted. Two major news outlets (Aftonbladet and Svenska Dagbladet) are analyzed regarding their presentation of Islam. The reason for this is the previously established jeopardizing of civil rights as a main driver for democratic erosion and the subsequent symptoms in the media. Islam's exposure was chosen to represent how freedom of religion is treated in the Swedish news media as the ascertained symptoms often affect a particular group. In this case, Islam was selected because of recent Swedish history, which saw a rise in the popularity of right-wing parties that deliberately attack Muslims verbally. Additionally, crimes such as Quran burnings and Mosque attacks have increased in the past years. Yet, Sweden is considered a stable and liberal democracy with freedom of religion anchored in its constitution, making it an interesting case to analyze regarding early democratic erosion and the role of the news media.

The reason for including a tabloid and a broadsheet is to compare the patterns over the selected time frame in the analysis. The empirical analysis uses a mixed-methods approach that examines Islam's portrayal in the news media. First, a quantitative content analysis of

687 articles in total is conducted. While collecting that data, some articles that represent respective symptoms were chosen and presented qualitatively alongside the results of the quantitative analysis. The findings show that both news outlets display several symptoms of early democratic erosion and have contributed to democratic erosion by being a microphone for political actors in several instances over the past years. SvD is more committed to factual informing of the public than AB, highlighting that tabloids are more drawn to sensationalist reporting. Nonetheless, an increasing pattern of positive developments by SvD and AB can be observed, especially in the year 2023, where both news outlets fulfill their normative roles as watchdog more consistently and challenge the opinions of the elite more actively. This enables an optimistic prediction for the future in the Swedish case. The Swedish news media have the potential to play an essential role in safeguarding Swedish democracy by adhering to their normative roles.

Keywords: Democratic Erosion, Role of News Media, Sweden, Freedom of Religion

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# 1. Introduction

“Democracy in the world is in decline” is the initial introduction of the latest democracy report published by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) in 2024. “According to V-Dem, the number of liberal democracies dropped from forty-two in 2012 to thirty-four in 2021, with those thirty-four housing just 13 percent of the world’s population” (Keck, 2023: 315). These numbers present a somber future for democracies around the globe. While this reversal from democracies to autocracies is not a new phenomenon, the reverting of democracies and their values have changed throughout the past decade. Throughout history, democracies used to turn anti-democratic through clear and visible attacks on the system. Still, recent trends depict a more gradual weakening of democratic ideals (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019: 5) The rise of populist parties across Europe has triggered widespread concern over the stability of Western democracies throughout the past decade, accompanied by the international upsurge of electoral autocratizations as documented by V-Dem’s data. These parties are characterized by their propagation of undemocratic ideologies through subtle means, despite participating in legal electoral processes, thereby posing a significant threat to the democratic fabric of society (Daly & Jones, 2019). The use of populist rhetoric in the communication of such parties significantly undermines democratic ideals in the public sphere, with minority groups often ending up as casualties of such discourse (Demker, 2023: 110). As noted by Ekman & Krzyżanowski (2021) “[k]ey actors of right-wing populist politics have in many ways succeeded in normalizing the language and tropes of the far right, and thus paved the way for illiberal politics entering the mainstream” (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 69).

These ongoing trends have sparked the development of the contemporary concept of democratic erosion, also referred to as democratic backsliding, which aims to explain the way democracies are continuously being weakened by having their democratic norms, institutions, and practices undermined. Democratic erosion is a slow process and often evades public attention, thereby remaining unnoticed by the masses (Kneuer, 2021). How exactly the early stages of democratic erosion progress has not been defined yet, but researchers have found that the decay of civil liberties is a main indicator and driver of democratic decline (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 1). However, existing research has not established the precise role of the news media in this scenario. As the news media are responsible for spreading information, challenging the elite, and educating the public in a functioning democracy, it is essential to assess how the news media may contribute or counteract to democratic erosion and how symptoms of democratic erosion can be recognized.

## 1.1. Problematization

While the concept of democratic erosion has established itself in the political science realm and is considered a respectable theory that is used by scholars across the globe, other fields, such as communications research, have presented small to no contributions on the matter. The theory is usually utilized from a political science perspective with a focus on the decline of democratic levels within national institutions.

Furthermore, the theory has only scarcely been applied to democracies considered stable to examine what the early stages of democratic decline in the news media could look like. Instead, it mainly explains the process and history of recognizably failing democracies, namely nations such as the United States of America or European countries like Hungary and Poland. This is problematic as it is crucial to look at the early stages of democratic backsliding as well and recognize the faintest symptoms to be able to counteract the process. Research on the consequences of democratic backsliding is essential, but it does not provide knowledge of its roots. This highlights the importance of examining the early dynamics of democratic erosion within seemingly stable democratic systems.

Additionally, the existing approach, which focuses mainly on the role of political actors and governmental institutions due to its origins in political science, is insufficient to explain what amplifies democratic erosion in its early stages. Current research fails to include the role of the news media during democratic erosion. This is criticizable as "(...) the news media have become the most important source of information for most people in advanced democracies around the world" (Strömbäck, 2008: 229) and therefore need to be considered in democratic research. Adding to that is the ability of the news media to create narratives that impact the public, shaping common beliefs and attitudes (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 69). Therefore, their power over public opinion is significant when assessing democratic decline because the news media might contribute to or counter democratic erosion in its early stages. As of now, there is no existing theory that provides a framework to examine the role of the news media in such a situation.

## 1.2. Aims and Objectives

This theoretically motivated paper aims to fill part of the current research gap and provide a theoretical framework that can assist in determining early symptoms of democratic erosion in the news media landscape. This is done by using an interdisciplinary approach that draws from the realms of both political science and communication studies. An account of what symptoms of early democratic erosion can look like is proposed in this thesis. Furthermore, by determining the role of the news media in a healthy democracy and the prerequisites needed for the news media to fulfil its purpose, a theoretical framework is deductively created that assesses the news media's role in the early stages of democratic erosion.

Such knowledge is relevant when aiming to detect the origin of democratic decline and understand what measures can be undertaken to counter the phenomenon. As existing research fails to consider the role of the news media in relation to democratic erosion, this thesis is significant and valuable as it provides useful insights and a new approach with contemporary perspectives. The following research questions, which are theoretically oriented, will be considered:

**RQ1:** What roles may the news media play during the early stages of democratic erosion?

**RQ2:** What may potential symptoms of early democratic erosion in the news media look like?

A comprehensive picture is presented based on the combination of the fields of political science and communication studies, which complements existing knowledge. This is particularly useful when educating on democratic decline and learning to understand its constituents.

An exploratory empirical approach will be made by administering the proposed theoretical framework to Sweden as a case study. The focus is on the presentation of human rights in the news media over the past decade, and this paper assesses if democratic values are being undermined and if the news media coverage exhibits symptoms of early democratic erosion in Sweden. To make the empirical research more accessible, it will focus on the human right 'freedom of religion' as a case study and assess how the world religion of Islam is presented in the news media. The decision to focus on freedom of religion is grounded in the fact that "[t]he issue of religious freedom has become the subject of escalating conflict in the Swedish news media and related public debate – as part of political disputes over migration" (Demker, 2023: 110). Further reasoning for the chosen case study can be found in Chapter 6. Based on existing research, which found that "(...) the degree of support for

religious freedom among the population indicates how thick the democratic base is in a given country” (Demker, 2023: 119) and the knowledge of the rising propagation of undemocratic ideals across Europe, this thesis asks the following research question:

**RQ3:** Are symptoms of early democratic erosion detectable in the Swedish media?

### 1.3. Relevance

While democratic erosion has been the subject of much contemporary research, scholars have failed to assess the role of news media in early democratic erosion. By helping to fill this gap and thereby learning more about democratic erosion itself, potential symptoms as well as contributory factors, this thesis adds to existing academic knowledge. An enhanced understanding of democratic erosion in its early stages and what role the news media fulfill can help shape further education on the subject, which is valuable in figuring out how one can work to strengthen democracy. Furthermore, this thesis provides a base for future research on the topic and encourages the exploration of democratic erosion from various perspectives.

This thesis is not just of academic but of societal relevance as well. As research by scholars Entman (1989) has shown, news media frames can influence public opinion and shape how citizens evaluate specific issues. Democratic erosion is, among other reasons, happening because right-wing parties with anti-democratic ideals are elected to parliament by the public. Their visions are, along with other platforms such as social news media, communicated to the public sphere via news media channels. Understanding how this distribution of news and the framing of certain subjects, such as freedom of religion, contribute to democratic erosion in its early stages is essential if a state and its citizens are to recognize the symptoms and counteract them. Adding to this, the findings of this thesis can inform democratic institutions about the reasons why safeguarding press freedom, the promotion of news media literacy, and the ensuring of regulations against manipulation of news media content are essential for a healthy democracy. Understanding news media, especially in times of democratic decline, can lead to more effective policy responses and protect democracy from within.

## 1.4. Outline

As stated recently by scholars who work on democratic decline, in order to successfully study the subject “(...) one needs (1) to state a definition of democracy, (2) to describe the relevant institutions or norms that operationalize the definition, (3) to isolate the status quo nature of those institutions (which themselves may be far from “democratic”), and (4) to identify an action that moves away from the status quo in a direction that makes the polity less democratic given the definition” (Druckman, 2024: 2).

This thesis follows this outline and, therefore, starts with a presentation of what democracy is and how different tools measure democracy. This is followed by a conceptualization of the components of a liberal democracy with a specific focus on civil liberties. Afterward, the concept of democratic erosion is illustrated, and the current debates on the subject are presented. This is followed by an elaboration of the news media in a democracy, which is necessary for the subsequent chapter on the symptoms of democratic erosion in the media and the potential roles the media may play.

Afterward, the reasoning for choosing the case of Sweden and the Freedom of Religion is presented before discussing the research design, selected methods, sampling procedure, and concurrent reliability and validity. Subsequently, the results of the empirical analysis are presented and discussed. Aspects such as implications and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research, can be found in the discussion part. The paper concludes with a well-rounded summary where the main findings of this thesis are highlighted.

## 2. On Democracy

### 2.1. What is Democracy?

Almost everyone has heard Abraham Lincoln's famous description of democracy as a 'government of the people, by the people and for the people' (Grover, 2020). However, while these inspirational words might capture the intended spirit of democracy, they do not provide details of what a democracy requires and why democratic practices differ significantly between nations. To investigate the erosion of democracy, it is therefore important to define precisely what a democracy is, and which aspects make it democratic. This helps us understand what democratic erosion entails and what symptoms can look like in the later analysis.

Despite the term 'democracy' being widely used, distinct specifications and notions of democracy vary among scholars and the public. What some might consider essential in a democracy, others might dismiss as not necessary for a nation to be recognized as democratic. Further adding to the controversy, the term has experienced misappropriations, such as the Chinese Communist Party using the term 'democracy' to describe its political system or dictator Kim Jong-Un officially declaring his autocratic regime the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea' (Freedom House, 2009). Concerning these uses of the term, the non-profit organization Freedom House has identified purposeful attempts of such regimes "[...] to reshape the public understanding of democracy" (Freedom House, 2009: 3). This is done by using the news media and other communication channels to communicate a distorted account of what democracy means to domestic audiences (Freedom House, 2009).

In the Western realm of political science, the term 'democracy' can be indexed into various conventional types that make a distinction based on institutional characteristics. The most common differentiations are, among others, based on the representation of the people or the separation of powers, for example, comparing a presidential to a parliamentary or a direct to a representative democracy (Kaiser, 1997: 419). "For instance, Coppedge et al. (2011) survey the large literature on democracy and identify six conceptions or "models": electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian" (BenYishay & Betancourt, 2014: 553). While all normative models prioritize different functions within a democracy, they have two central fundamental values in common: "(...) the sovereignty of the people and the free exchange of ideas (...)" (Asp, 2007: 32).

Even though these different typologies are helpful when discussing different types of democracies, the general composition of how a democracy is institutionally put together is not entirely significant for this thesis. Much more relevant are the elements within the different types of democracies, the essential components that make a government democratic. The question of which aspects contribute to democracy and how they can be measured gains new importance in contemporary times, especially when considering the current trends towards autocracy (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 5). The answer to this question is debated among scholars and the public, and different tools to measure levels of democracy have been developed to determine democratic quality and its constituents. These measurement tools and their understanding of democracy are summarized before presenting an in-depth assessment of the respective democratic components.

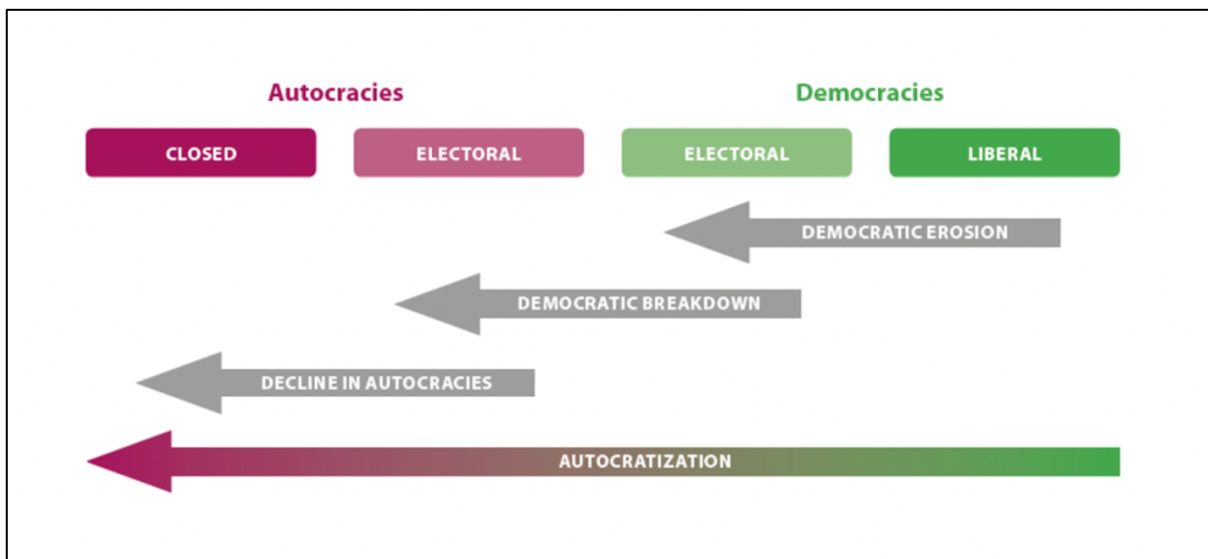
One of the most recently developed tools is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, a research approach to conceptualize and measure democracy. The V-Dem tool measures five core principles (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian) to determine the level of democracy in a nation. These principles include various components, such as free and fair elections, civil liberties, and news media freedom, considered essential in a democracy (Varieties of Democracy, 2024). This distinguishes the V-Dem approach to measure democracies from other developed tools as it attempts to explain different varieties of democracy that link different aspects together.

Adding to the work of V-Dem is their additional research program on autocratization in the world (V-Aut). Aiming to understand better why regimes move towards autocracy according to their data, they examine how incumbents render democratic systems more autocratic and how it is possible to identify potential autocratizers before they are officially elected (Varieties of Autocratization, 2024). In this research project, the move from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy is considered democratic erosion. In contrast, the development of an electoral democracy towards an electoral autocracy can be seen as a democratic breakdown (refer to Figure 1). While the research project aims to contribute important information on the previously elaborated trends of different democracies becoming more and more autocratic, it too focuses on a political science perspective.

Another well-known tool is Freedom House, which measures the quality of a democracy based on civil liberties and political rights. Just as V-Dem, Freedom House is also concerned with the rising autocratization they have documented and works towards countering the phenomenon. They identified “[a] growing disregard for the conditions that form the foundations of democracy - including respect for the rights of minorities and migrant [...] - threatens to destabilize [...] democratic order” (Freedom House, 2021: 21).

The Democracy Matrix (DeMaX), another essential tool determining global democratic quality between 1900 and 2017, uses three dimensions: political freedom, political equality, and political and legal control (Democracy Matrix, 2024). Using the dataset created by V-Dem, the DeMaX focuses on different institutions (procedures of decisions, regulation of inter-news mediate sphere, public communication, guarantee of rights, rules settlement, and implementation) (Democracy Matrix, 2024). Thereby, the measurement tool creates fifteen different matrix fields considered relevant when assessing democratic quality, indicating a focus “[...] on the complementary interaction of normative principles and institutions” (Lauth et al., no date). In terms of terminology, DeMaX differentiates between a working and a deficient democracy as well as a moderate and a hard autocracy (Democracy Matrix, 2024).

**Figure 1: Types of Autocratization**



Note. Source: (Varieties of Autocratization, 2024).

When examining these different measurement tools, it becomes apparent that they all highlight similar aspects when assessing democratic quality and have a relatively liberal definition of democracy, meaning they include a variety of requirements. While factors such as the rule of law, civil liberties, and regular free elections are considered equally important across all measurement tools, some even add more specific criteria for a nation to reach a higher level of democracy. However, to analyze democratic erosion in connection to the role of the news media, this thesis must demonstrate a clear understanding of which aspects are vital for a government to be considered democratic. Instead of providing one final definition of democracy, this thesis will assess the different components needed for a state to be considered democratic and define them.

## 2.2. Conceptualizing Democratic Components

As highlighted by the different measurement tools, certain aspects are essential to a liberal definition of democracy. These elements (refer to Table 1) include the rule of law, regular free and fair elections, and civil liberties (Møller & Skaaning, 2013).

For the rule of law, the World Justice Project (WJP) views four principles as a foundation for the concept (World Justice Project, 2024). The project sees accountability under the law for both government and private actors as the first principle. The second one demands an open government that is transparent and accessible regarding its legislative branch. All processes regarding the passing and administering of laws need to be accessible and fair. Thirdly, a stable and precise law that guarantees human rights constitutes the third principle. The last and fourth one demands timely justice, which is impartial and administered by neutral actors. Again, the project emphasizes transparency as a primary characteristic (World Justice Project, 2024).

Similarly, the United Nations share a comparable understanding. “For the United Nations (UN) system, the rule of law is a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards” (United Nations, 2024).

Also, “[t]he original UN Declaration states that ‘everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives’ and goes on to make this more specific by referring to ‘periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures’ (Article 21)” (Miller, 2015: 2). Scholars such as Dahl (2000) who make the anatomy of democracy their primary research focus, confirm that effective participation, equality in voting, and the inclusion of all adult permanent residents are essential in a democracy (Dahl, 2000: 38). While elections are central to a democracy, “(...) the presence of elections alone does not ensure democracy, therefore democracy is generally conceptualized as multi-dimensional” (Whitten-Woodring, 2009: 597). This highlights the importance of civil liberties in addition to the rule of law and regular free elections.

**Table 1: A Typology of Democratic Political Regimes**

	Competitive Elections	Inclusive Elections with High Integrity	Civil Liberties	Rule of Law
Minimalist Democracy	+			
Electoral Democracy	+	+		
Polyarchy	+	+	+	
Liberal Democracy	+	+	+	+

*Note. Source: Møller & Skaaning (2013). This thesis adopts the liberal democracy definition.*

### 2.3. The Importance of Civil Liberties

When taking a closer look at the term ‘civil liberties’, however, a diversity in interpretations is recognizable, and its inclusion is often considered part of a broader, more liberal definition for democracies. Civil liberties are generally more difficult to measure when following Gorokhovskaia's (2024) recent publishment. Nonetheless, according to Freedom House researchers, their “(...) data show that deterioration in a range of civil liberties is the primary driver of democratic decline” (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 1). This makes civil liberties a critical focal point in this thesis and stresses the importance of defining the term clearly.

Furthermore, it is essential to clear up the distinction between ‘civil liberties’ and ‘civil rights’. While these two terms used to be applied interchangeably, “[i]n the early years of the Cold War, liberal anticommunists sought to distinguish their incipient interest in the cause of racial equality from their belief that national security required limitations on the speech and due process rights of suspected subversives” (Schmidt, 2016: 1), which led to the distinction between the terms. Nowadays, the term ‘civil rights’ is used when the subject regards the protection against discrimination, whereas ‘civil liberties’ are considered to be a claim of individual freedom from regulating governments (Schmidt, 2016: 1). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, civil liberties are ‘the rights of a person to do, think, and say what they want if this does not harm other people’. Examples of civil rights are the right to vote or equal employment opportunity, whereas civil liberties are the freedom of religion or speech. In this case, freedom of religion means the right to freely practice whatever belief an individual has and not be discriminated for by the government or other members of society.

Civil liberties encompass human rights “(...) as human rights [are] the freedom of the individual to share the beliefs, thoughts and world-views of a community, to be part of a community and to practice their way of life” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014: 119). While human rights and civil liberties are closely related, they are still two distinct concepts. Civil liberties are rights guaranteed by law to a particular society within a state. In contrast, human rights regard all living human beings and are universal, regardless of nationality or ethnicity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). According to BenYishay and Betancourt (2014), human rights can be divided into first and second generations, with the first generation referring to rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and equality before the law (BenYishay & Betancourt, 2014, p. 555). The second generation encompasses more specific and economically focused rights, with the protection of ownership and the right to individual mobility included (BenYishay & Betancourt, 2014: 555). With the two generations of human rights in mind, BenYishay and Betancourt's (2014) argue that “(...) both dimensions must be considered to understand the setbacks recently experienced by many democracies, despite their holding of free and fair elections” (BenYishay & Betancourt, 2014: 552).

Yet, when it comes to the details of civil liberties and which ones are necessary for a democracy to be considered democratic, many components of human rights, which by definition should be included, have been threatened lately, even in established Western democracies with the “(...) infringement of human rights and the curtailing of freedom of expression” (Kwode et al., 2023: 114). This development can be observed in a variety of different European countries. A prime example is Poland, where human rights such as the freedom of religion have been threatened, and followers of certain beliefs have been experiencing harassment and discrimination (Demczuk, 2021). This is against Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was passed by the United Nations (UN) in 1948. Other aspects, such as Poland denying asylum to refugees and both countries passing laws to discriminate against migrants and members of the LGBTQ+ group, add to the growing anti-democratic characteristics of the ruling governments (Freedom House, 2024a). Still, the country holds regular elections and has an established rule of law, guaranteeing civil liberties to specific groups of the public and thereby fulfilling particular aspects of democracy, namely those of the participatory model (Freedom House, 2024a). Therefore, as Kirchschlaeger (2014) has pointed out and as the example of Poland demonstrates, human rights can still be violated in a democracy if the majority votes (Kirchschlaeger, 2014: 120).

Instead, “(...) there is a need for the civil and political rights employed in the democratic process, the availability of neutral electoral machinery, and the stability, predictability, and

publicity of a legal regime usually captured in the term ‘Rule of Law’” (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018a: 87). To be considered a strong democracy, human rights need to be respected and accepted “[a]s the democratic principle is part of human rights, [and] a democracy is built on the fundament of human rights” (Kirchschlaeger, 2014: 120). This perception is also in line with Dahl’s (2006) description of an ideal democracy in which he cites the inclusion of every member as an important aspect (Dahl, 2006: 6). In accordance with Huq & Ginsburg (2018a), this thesis adopts the standpoint that a democracy needs more than just the lowest possible amount of legal or institutional stipulations. An overview of all components discussed in this thesis is provided in Table 2. Democratic erosion can occur within any of these components, and previous research has mainly focused on the rule of law and regular free elections when assessing the phenomenon. This thesis focuses on democratic erosion in regard to civil liberties from a communications perspective and what potential symptoms of that can look like in the media.

**Table 2: Democracy Components**

<b>Rule of Law</b>	<b>Regular Free and Fair Elections</b>	<b>Civil Liberties</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability under law for government and private actors</li> <li>• Open and transparent government</li> <li>• Stable and precise laws</li> <li>• Impartial justice administered by neutral actors</li> <li>• Guarantee human rights (first and second generation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective participation</li> <li>• Equality in voting</li> <li>• Inclusion of all adult permanent residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom of Religion</li> <li>• Freedom of Speech</li> <li>• Freedom from regulation by the government on personal actions that do not harm others</li> </ul>

*Note. This table is a summary of the democratic components highlighted in this thesis. This thesis adopts the understanding of a liberal democracy. It may not be sufficient for other understandings or perceptions. Table created by thesis author based on contents of chapter 2.3.*

### 3. Democratic Erosion

Generally, democratic erosion is widely understood as a country retreating from democracy through autocratic leaders who attack democratic norms and institutions from inside the system (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021: 27). In accordance with Ginsburg and Huq (2018a), democratic erosion can therefore be viewed as the process of “[...] decay in [the] three basic predicates of democracy-competitive elections, liberal rights to speech and association, and the adjudicative and administrative rule of law necessary for democratic choice to thrive” (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018a: 83). The process of democracies turning anti-democratic has changed throughout the decades: as described by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019), democracies used to fall victim to military coups or autocrats, but now the dynamics of democratic decline have slowed down and are often executed by means of democratic institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). The reason for these changes is that “[e]rosion, in which democracy is undermined in a series of incremental steps, some of which can be defended in legalistic terms, is alluring for would-be autocrats because it can yield the same outcome as a frontal attack on democratic institutions, but without the same risks” (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018b: 18). This often leads to a late realization of the threat, which exacerbates countermeasures. “A canonical example is the abrogation of Weimar democracy by the Nazi party that occurred during the early 1930s in Germany [and] more recently, on May 20, 2014, the Thai military suspended the constitution and ended democratic rule under a caretaker regime that had been calling for elections” (Miller, 2015: 2).

But as Druckman (2024) states, when studying how democracies decline “(...) one must specify what institution or norm is eroding by a given action and how that connects back to the definition of democracy one employs” (Druckman, 2024: 2). One exact definition that agrees with every scholar cannot be pinned down, and details between research papers and understandings might differ. For this reason, the elaboration of democracy and its components in the previous chapter was essential as the more liberal definition of democracy used in this thesis emphasizes the existence of civil liberties, including human rights. Therefore, the decline of these liberties constitutes democratic erosion according to the understanding employed in this thesis.

Research on democratic erosion has been rather recent, with the first influential essay on the subject published by Bermeo (2016). Since then, scholars have started to analyze potential causes and how democracies break down. Democratic erosion has been divided into two different types by Wolkenstein (2023) the right-suspending and right-obstructing kind of erosion (Wolkenstein, 2023: 5). The right-suspending erosion “(...) involves either the

suspension of some or all of those fundamental constitutional rights that correspond to the basic rights categories, or that the exercise of those rights is obstructed without them being suspended” (Wolkenstein, 2023: 8) whereas right-obstructing democratic erosion “(...) occurs when the outcomes of political problem-solving processes make it more difficult or indeed impossible for particular groups or individuals to exercise the fundamental rights that they are granted by their respective constitutions, although those rights were not suspended” (Wolkenstein, 2023: 9). But so far, the subject has been studied mostly from a political science angle, and research on communication during the process of democratic decline is basically non-existent at the time of writing. Also, different phases or symptoms of a slow undermining of democratic ideals have not been the center of much research as of now, and there is no clear understanding of how exactly different forces contribute to a slow shift in the political atmosphere of a nation. This highlights the complexity of democratic erosion: “While the gradual nature of this process increases the coordination costs of mustering a prodemocratic response, the longer timeframe involved also creates windows during which some institutions and political forces can mobilize to mitigate or even undo [erosion]” (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018b: 18).

While there is no universal definition, early democratic erosion follows the understanding of the author of this thesis, when a democracy still has its norms and institutions in place, but it is starting to come under attack by politicians or public opinion. This phase displays a variety of symptoms that occur before clear government initiatives that reverse democratic features are taken.

### 3.1. The Terminology of Democratic Erosion

Despite different understandings of what exactly democratic erosion is constituted of, scholars can agree on one thing: the importance of definitions. There are different labels to describe that process; some scholars refer to ‘democratic erosion’ while others prefer to use the metaphor of ‘democratic backsliding’ (Bermeo, 2016). Recently, the adapted term of ‘democratic abuse’ has been suggested, which aims to capture the purposeful destruction of democracy (Bermeo, 2016). Scholars often use these labels interchangeably. However, there are slight differences between them, which many fail to recognize. As Keck (2023) has emphasized in his research, “[t]his phenomenon of democratic decline is widely acknowledged, but its sources and character are in dispute” (Keck, 2023: 315). According to Keck (2023), the term ‘erosion’ describes unintended processes whereas ‘backsliding’ is more deliberate (Keck, 2023: 316). The term ‘abuse’ has been added to the list because it

suggests that democratic decline is a result of deliberate actions, thereby filling a linguistic gap that has unintentionally been created by researchers (Keck, 2023). Despite this new addition, this thesis will adopt the established term of 'democratic erosion' as it will analyze the early symptoms of democratic decline and the role the news media plays while assuming that the news media do not want to undermine democracy on purpose. Instead, the news media's coverage might be a byproduct of the government's recent political actions and the direction in which the nation is heading. However, this remains to be determined. Research has shown that "(...) social and political polarization contributes to government dysfunction and lack of trust in institutions, and it increases the risk that incumbent parties will move toward extremes or that new antisystem parties will gain traction" (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021: 27), leaving to role of the news media in that process an important aspect to analyze. While 'democratic erosion' is the dominant term in this thesis to ensure clarity on the subject and avoid confusion regarding the terminology, due to its interchangeably use in current research 'democratic backsliding' is equally accepted and literature of scholars referring to the latter in their works are evenly represented in the theoretical background of this thesis. Also, the term 'democratic decline' is used synonymously.

### 3.2. Is Democratic Erosion a Trend?

As mentioned previously, democracy measurement tools such as V-Dem and Freedom House have raised the alarm considering the trend of democracies declining and moving toward autocracies. This claim has recently been disputed by Little and Meng (2024), who argue that coder bias and an underlying pessimism cloud the judgment of these tools and affect the overall research on the subject (Little & Meng, 2024). According to them, democracies have not been globally declining during the last decade, and there is no systematic evidence to back opposing claims (Little & Meng, 2024: 1). However, Little and Meng (2024) use an electoral definition of democracy and focus solely on electoral competition and treatment of journalism when assessing democratic decline, stating that these two components can be considered objective and are therefore more relevant in democratic erosion research than subjective components such as civil liberties (Little & Meng, 2024: 4). This approach has been met with criticism by researchers who work for democratic measurement tools such as Freedom House as they argue that "[b]acksliding has been uneven across political rights and civil liberties" (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 2). These researchers have found that the decay of civil liberties is a main indicator and driver of democratic decline, a position not considered in Little and Meng's (2024) research.

Freedom House researchers state that even if a country still holds elections, it can undermine other components which might indicate a decline in democracy (Gorokhovskaia, 2024). This is supported by Baron et al. (2024) who criticize that Little and Meng's (2024) "(...) approach may underweight events that degrade the quality of democracy but do not (and may never) result in changes to electoral institutions and outcomes or that are difficult to measure objectively, such as threats to civil liberties or attacks on the independence of the judiciary" (Baron et al., 2024: 2). While components such as civil liberties are more challenging to measure, they "(...) are not necessarily less objective or factual and neither are they less important as causes of democratic backsliding" (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 5). According to Freedom House representatives, especially components such as civil liberties are an important differentiation between government types as both electoral autocracies and democracies can have elections (Gorokhovskaia, 2024). Still, certain civil liberties, such as the freedom of religion, represent the differences between the regime types (Gorokhovskaia, 2024: 5). As this thesis focuses on the obstruction of human rights as a potential symptom of democratic decline, a thicker definition of democracy (as presented in the previous chapter) is more suitable in this particular case as opposed to Little and Meng's (2024) approach in their recent work.

Despite the term 'human rights' being frequently used in the news media, especially in regard to current conflicts across the globe, its discourse is very vague. While this thesis does not aim to provide a new conceptualization of human rights, understanding what the term entails is essential, and a common understanding is required to follow the later analysis. To understand what human rights are, it is helpful to trace the idea back to its political establishment less than a century ago. In 1948, shortly after the end of the Second World War, the United Nations passed a declaration that universally established human rights, defining and protecting certain areas that are essential to the survival and life of a human individual (Kirchschlaeger, 2014: 113). Since then, the list of human rights has been consistently expanded and adapted to the modernization of life, including 30 articles as of this day (United Nations, 2024a). However, "[h]uman rights are rights with a certain complexity because they are at the same time moral, legal, and political rights" (Kirchschlaeger, 2014: 113). The passing of the declaration by the United Nations encompasses the legal dimension of human rights as they are clearly defined and can be enforced. This has also been achieved within the European Union as the European legal system "(...) is built around the European Convention of Human Rights of the Council of Europe (ECHR); adjudicated by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), it now allows individual petitions as well as inter-state complaints once domestic remedies have been exhausted" (Nash, 2016: 1296).

## 4. The News Media in a Democracy

When assessing the constituents of democratic decline, it becomes obvious how most of the research conducted by different scholars misses out on one important aspect: the role of the news media. As previous literature has shown, there is undoubtedly evidence that the news media hold immense power in shaping people's attitudes (Entman, 1989: 347). This knowledge needs to be considered when assessing democratic decline as "[h]istorical research shows that mass news media play a crucial role in enabling public acceptance of racism and xenophobia" (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 69). Suppose the news media contributes to the normalization of anti-democratic ideals among the citizens of a nation. In that case, it is an aspect that cannot be ignored in relation to democratic erosion. This thesis focuses on news outlets and not entertainment or social media for two reasons. Firstly, the specification allows for a narrower approach, which enables the delving into more specific aspects and more tangible results. Secondly, the news media play a valuable role in the shaping of public opinion (Kruikemeier, 2012), which is under investigation in this thesis. While entertainment and especially social news media also provide valuable insights, they are not regarded in this thesis, and broader future research which includes the different types is recommended.

### 4.1. Ideal vs. Reality

It is difficult to summarize the normative demands and roles of the news media for all democracies as they depend on the normative democracy model one refers to (Strömbäck, 2005). Depending on the model, the news media have to fulfill different requirements when providing information. To help with this, a conceptualization of democracies can be helpful. As can be seen in Table 3, Strömbäck distinguishes between four different types of democracy, which each have different normative demands for the news media (Strömbäck, 2005: 341). He differentiates between procedural, competitive, participatory, and deliberative democracies. The roles of the news media discussed in this thesis do not align with just one of the models but highlight different parts across the various models.

**Table 3: Normative Demands Upon Journalism**

	Procedural democracy	Competitive democracy	Participatory democracy	Deliberative democracy
Distinguishing and core normative demands upon news journalism	Respect the democratic procedures; act as a watchdog or as a Burglar Alarm exposing wrong-doings	Act as a watchdog or a Burglar Alarm; focus on the record of office-holders and the platforms of the political candidates and parties; focus on the political actors	Let the citizens set the agenda; mobilize the citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public life; focus on problem solving as well as problems; frame politics as a process open for principally everyone and citizens as active subjects; link active citizens together	Act for inclusive discussions; mobilize citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public discussions; link discussants to each other; foster public discussions characterized by rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty and equality

*Note. Source: Strömbäck (2005: 341).*

As can be seen in Table 3, ideally, the news media find a balance between being an actor and an arena in a democracy, depending on the normative requirements asked of them. However, in reality, the news media are often reduced to being an arena that reproduces other voices (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017: 8). This, according to Van Aelst and Walgrave (2017), is often because political actors want to get personal access so they can transfer their message across to the public (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017: 8). In this case, the news media amplify voices from the political realm instead of questioning them as they are ideally supposed to do. They facilitate opinions from the elite to be put on the agenda and transfer issue salience to the public simply by acting as a microphone for the government (Sen et al., 2018). It's problematic when the news media act as a microphone because it undermines news media pluralism by not challenging dominant voices (Karppinen, 2013). This can marginalize alternative voices and hinder the facilitation of democratic dialogue (Karppinen, 2013).

When functioning as an arena, the news media reproduce opinions and issue salience based on what the elite find significant (Sen et al., 2018). This highlights the importance of different political actors opposing each other and creating a healthy debate around a subject. Suppose such a healthy debate is not the case. Then, the complicity of the news media towards political actors can lead to the normalization of opinions of certain political actors in the public sphere, including those who oppose democratic values (Ekström et al., 2022).

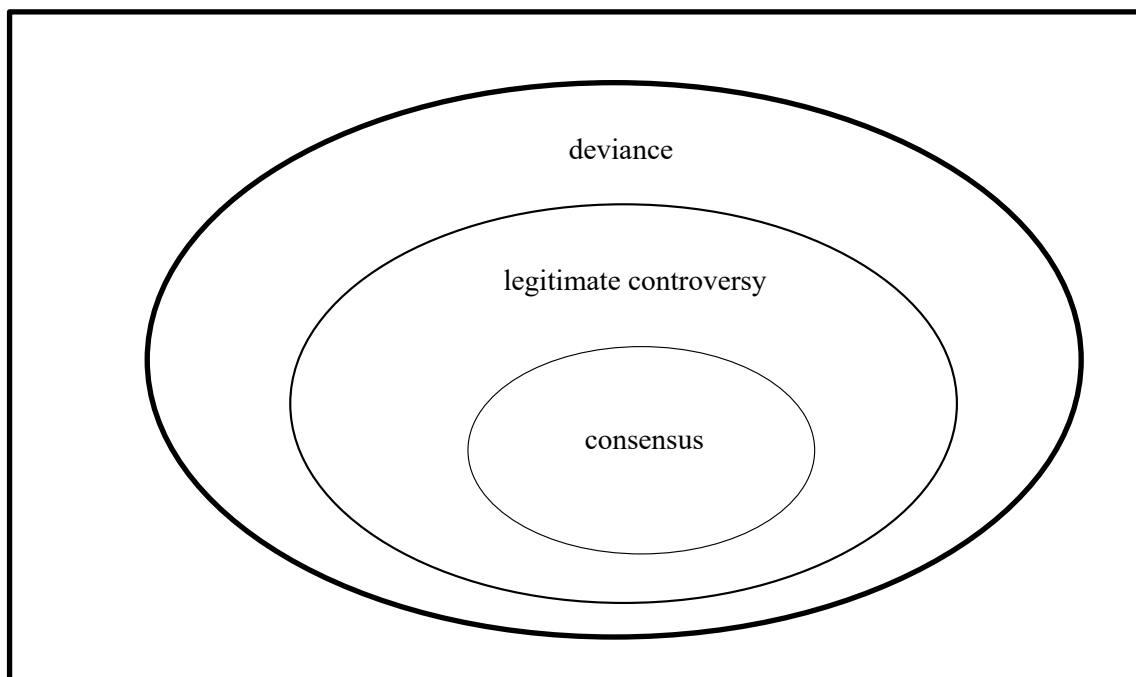
This issue can be clarified with the use of (Hallin, 1986) model, which exemplifies how news media coverage shapes political discourse, public perception and prescribes salience to issues. The model consists of three different spheres. As can be seen in Figure 2, the core of the model is the sphere of consensus. Within this sphere, there is almost no controversy and it includes topics that enjoy widespread agreement so the news media do not feel the need to question those subjects (Chandler & Munday, 2020). In the sphere of consensus, therefore, the neutrality of the news media often matters rather than fact-fulness, with the news media being an arena for agreed-upon subjects. The second layer is the sphere of legitimate controversy in which “(...) the mainstream political issues debated by the major political parties, in relation to which journalists are always expected to demonstrate objectivity and balance” (Chandler & Munday, 2020). Ideally, in a healthy democracy, the news media act within this sphere and facilitate open debate. Last is the sphere of deviance. Here, neutrality is not provided nor expected, and news media coverage becomes increasingly polarized (Chandler & Munday, 2020). It is important to note that the boundaries between the spheres, as well as the issues within them, are not steadily fixed and can change. The media can influence where different topics belong and how they are presented in the public sphere (Hallin, 1986).

Hallin's (1986) model is helpful in trying to understand what happens when a political actor or a certain subject moves from the sphere of consensus or deviance to the sphere of legitimate controversy. A move from the consensus to the legitimate controversy sphere enables a previously agreed-upon issue to be discussed and opposed. When an issue moves from the sphere of deviance, where it was opposed and not accepted, to the sphere of legitimate controversy, it signifies a normalization and potential acceptance of the issue as a discussion is enabled, and it is not imminently opposed when covered (Hallin, 1986). This is a crucial aspect when assessing democratic erosion symptoms in the media because the acceptance or normalization of certain issues related to civil liberties might have an influence on the phenomenon. How the media might counteract or contribute to democratic erosion is discussed in Chapter 5.

Another aspect that can be critical when assessing democratic erosion is the information the news media publish. From a normative perspective, the news media provide the audience with “(...) tools and information so that they can act for themselves” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021: 21). Because news are used by the audience to learn and comprehend the world, they have to be reliable (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021: 45). Therefore, ideally, the information provided by the news media is objective and neutral. This, however, is an issue in reality. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) discuss objectivity as being the commitment to present facts

as accurately as possible and neutrality as being the lack of bias for one side of an issue of another side (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Objectivity, according to the two scholars, is an inherent challenge for the news media in reality because of the information overflow and the fast pace nowadays. It makes it harder to verify information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021: 63). Additionally, news media can never be entirely neutral because a news bias impacting neutrality is automatically created when actively selecting which stories to present (Wolfsfeld, 2011: 4). When letting the selection be influenced by political actors, who compete over the news media with an aim to promote their own frames, the news media are acting complicit, which in turn affects their perceived neutrality as well (Wolfsfeld, 2011: 3). But what is even expected of the media normatively?

**Figure 2: Hallin's Spheres**



*Note. Figure created by thesis author based on Hallin's (1986) model.*

## 4.2. Normative Roles of the News Media

From a normative perspective, the news media have a variety of different tasks to fulfill across the different normative democracy models. These tasks can be divided into political and social functions according to Fawzi (2020). The social functions of the news media entail three main roles: the socialization of citizens, social integration as well as the orientational function (Fawzi, 2020). Simply put, the news media is responsible for creating norm awareness among citizens while simultaneously providing them with information that enables them to navigate society and shape a feeling of belonging (Fawzi, 2020: 191). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) summarize, “[t]he primary purpose of journalism (...) [is] to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021: 7).

The political functions of the news media are more extensive. Foremost, the news media’s informational function can be considered the foundation for all other functions as the news media provide an informational forum for citizens and the elite where mainstream as well as alternative views can be discussed (Fawzi, 2020: 191). This implies a free and independent press as only independent news media can guarantee a dialogue in which all opinions are considered equally valid (Fawzi, 2020). As only democracy can provide such freedom, democratic structures are the core condition for a functioning public sphere (Drüeke, 2018: 20). The public sphere can be represented as a forum for discussion and retrieving information, which is vital in a democracy, so everyone has a platform to share their views and elites can make informed decisions on behalf of the citizens (Graber, 2003: 143). Such a forum also outlines two other important functions of the news media. The first one is the creation of an arena, which means that all information supplied by the news media should be available to both elites and citizens in order to enable informational exchange, and the other is the articulation of citizens’ opinions (Fawzi, 2020: 191). Therefore, “[t]he news media should act as an internews intermediary between citizens and elites, providing both with the information essential for a well-functioning democracy” (Clawson & Oxley, 2021: 118). This provision of information is important as the news media inform and thereby enable citizens to form opinions, develop a political discernment, and deploy it in political processes, thereby contributing to a functioning democracy (Fawzi, 2020: 191). Furthermore, the informational function of the news media can enhance the visibility of politics and thereby encourage democratic change or take power-affirming positions (Drüeke, 2018: 19). According to Asp (2007), “[t]he principal task of the news media in a democracy is to contribute to free and autonomous opinion formation in society” (Asp, 2007: 32).

Nonetheless, another crucial role of the news media is their watchdog function for the citizens, an agency that surveils the behavior of public officials and holds them responsible for their actions (Asp, 2007). "News media should freely and independently keep holders of power under surveillance and scrutinize their actions so as to enable citizens to form an opinion of their rulers' performance" (Asp, 2007: 33). This task is especially important as citizens cannot keep an eye on everything going on in the government or other public offices, so they rely on the news media to keep them updated and equip them with the required information to hold them accountable (Graber, 2003: 143). By staying skeptical towards the decision-making and power processes of a government, the news media, as watchdogs, exercise control and support transparency in political decision-making (Drüeke, 2018: 22). Following Whitten-Woodring's (2009) statement, many non-governmental organizations argue for the importance of the news media in regard to improving governmental respect for human rights due to their role as watchdogs ((Whitten-Woodring, 2009). By scrutinizing those in power, the news media pushes the government to be more responsible and responsive (Whitten-Woodring, 2009: 595). This makes the watchdog role an indispensable part of a democratic society (Drüeke, 2018: 25). However, for the news media to successfully act as a watchdog, a free press is required. According to Whitten-Woodring (2009), this requires several premises such as the protection of news media freedom, the absence of censorship, the encouragement of journalists to act as watchdogs and a free political environment which does not threaten journalists (Whitten-Woodring, 2009: 598). Acting as a watchdog, not just the environment in which the news media operate has to fulfil certain demands but also the news media themselves. Based on a normative democratic principle, the news media need to be fair, meaning that "[n]ews media should treat various views and ideas in such a way that no view is unduly favored or discounted" (Asp, 2007: 35).

This demand for fairness relates directly to an influence the news media can have: agenda-setting, which "(...) describes and explains the role of the news media in building a consensus about the most important issues of the day" (McCombs, 2014: 91). There are three levels of agenda setting. The first level regards the transfer of issue salience, meaning that issues that are high on the news media's agenda and emphasized by the outlets ultimately transfer onto the public's perception of what is important (McCombs, 2014). The second level corresponds with this as "(...) specific aspects of news media content about public affairs are explicitly linked to the shape of public opinion" (McCombs, 2014: 134). So, the news media influences the importance of both the elements of an issue and its detailed attributes. In his work on agenda-setting, McCombs, (2014) also introduces a third level which is concerned with the relationships between objects and attributes. Here, the news

media again influences the importance of the idea and transfers it onto public opinion (McCombs, 2014). This is where the fairness of the news media comes into play. Depending on them, certain actors or issues can be covered favorably or put higher on the agenda. These three levels clearly indicate how much influence the news media hold over the public, affecting not just the feeling of significance but also the consequential understanding of subjects, which in turn can affect an individual's personal behavior (McCombs, 2014). So "[w]hile news media cannot deliver policy on their own, they are fully equipped to represent, interpret and amplify grievances" (McDevitt, 2022: 500). These capabilities have long-reaching effects as public opinion can influence election outcomes as well as the attitude towards certain issues and thereby forge the overall political atmosphere in a nation (Tricarico & Peixoto Scudellari, 2021).

It is not just agenda-setting that influences public opinion; the framing of issues by the news media also influences how the public understands and consequentially thinks about certain issues (Lecheler & Vreese, 2019). The act of framing does not enjoy an unequivocal definition shared among scholars. Still, according to Lecheler and Vreese (2019), it can be understood as the news media emphasizing or hiding certain issue details to suggest a specific narrative. By being selective about the highlighted aspects, the consumer of the news outlet proposes a particular perspective, which in turn influences their decision-making and overall judgment of a situation (Lecheler & Vreese, 2019). "Frames emerge in an interactive process between two groups: (1) stakeholders and their preferred frames, and (2) the priorities set by journalists and news production routines" (Lecheler & Vreese, 2019: 91). Evidently, in addition to their agenda-setting function, the framing by the news media is an important tool used to influence public opinion, which are so-called framing effects (Clawson & Oxley, 2021). These two aspects demonstrate the power the news media hold in a democracy.

The elaborated core functions of the news media anticipate engaged citizens who are involved in their countries' politics and stay informed on prevailing issues (Strömbäck, 2005). This is typical for the normative model of a participatory and deliberative democracy, which sees citizens setting the agenda and the news media mobilizing their engagement in politics (Strömbäck, 2005). The presented roles of the news media, however, are independent from the different normative models, and while "[s]ome roles may be more important in certain circumstances than in others, (...) fundamentally, the roles and virtues of journalism in democracies are inseparable and universal" (Trappel et al., 2011: 19). Different normative models prioritize divergent functions of the news media, but what all normative models have in common is their requirement for the news media to be free to fulfill their function in

democracy (Drüeke, 2018). In turn, democracy relies on them: “ (...) journalism needs democracy for its freedom and independence and, in turn, democracy needs journalism for the flow of information, for public discussions about political issues, and as a watchdog against the abuse of power” (Strömbäck, 2005: 332). This interdependence can be considered a social contract in which both parties enable each other by fulfilling their normative roles (Garnier et al., 2020). “(...) Journalism serves democracy by providing fair and full information to citizens, by investigating sources of power, by providing analysis and coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens make sense of a complex world, by exposing citizens to the views and experiences of others, by providing a public forum for dialogue, and by serving as advocates for mobilization for particular political programs” (Garnier et al., 2020: 638). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) support these claims, adding that journalism is fundamental to creating democracy. Importantly, for the news media to be able to fulfill the previously described normative roles, they need to be independent. As Baker (2002) argues: “Democracy is impossible without a free press” (Baker, 2002: 125).

### 4.3. Failing their Normative Roles

As highlighted in previous chapters, democratic erosion finds its sources in institutional shortcomings and the influence of political actors who have an interest in changing the democratic components to their advantage. The news media alone are not the cause of democratic erosion, but they “(...) can act as an accelerant or corrective depending on how it manages grievance” (McDevitt, 2022: 502). Previous research has not yet established what exactly the news media’s role in the early stages of democratic erosion is, how symptoms are represented in news outlets, and how they counter or contribute to the phenomenon. To fill this gap, the following chapter will analyze how the news media can fail their normative roles in a democracy. The general analysis of the news media failing their normative tasks is not a new thought and contemporary “[s]tudies question the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the political information provided by newspapers, as well as the expectation that they provide citizens with the substantial, factual and diverse views that are necessary for informed public debate” (Garnier et al., 2020: 638). However, these studies have not connected such failure to democratic erosion, which this thesis will accomplish in Chapter 5.

The news media failing their normative roles can have several implications. The potential of the news media to influence public opinion can jeopardize democracy when anti-democratic views are distributed by putting certain issues on the agenda and framing them accordingly

(R. D. Anderson, 1998). As elaborated in the previous chapter, the news media are supposed to provide a forum, a so-called marketplace, for ideas and enable exchange between the elite and the public (Fawzi, 2020). But if this market is not working, then different ideas are not being exchanged, and only similar perspectives are presented by the news media (Bennett et al., 2007: 180), thereby failing not only in providing the forum but also in enabling healthy public debate. It is problematic when the news media merely rely on information from the government to the public and do not seek alternative information sources (Okumura et al., 2021: 2675). If the news media are not acting independently and only transfer the perceived issue salience provided by the government to the public, an understanding of the news media and the government being tied together might develop among the public (Bennett et al., 2007). This, among other reasons, can lead to a loss of confidence in not just the news media but potentially also the government, which in turn threatens a democracy's healthy functioning (Bennett et al., 2007: 177). "When the government will not hold itself responsible for scandals, errors, and failures, a news media system tied so tightly to those very same government institutions will have little basis for independently raising and sustaining critical questions on the public's behalf" (Bennett et al., 2007: 130). This again highlights the need for news media independence, as stressed in the previous chapter.

The news media can also fail in their normative role as a watchdog for the people. "Through the news media's independent scrutiny, in theory, the public can understand what its leaders are doing and call them to account for their policy decisions" (Bennett et al., 2007: 130). This means that the news media challenge public officials when they release misleading statements and that the news media publish correct as well as important news which inform the people to enable reasonable decision-making (Clawson & Oxley, 2021: 118). The watchdog role of the news media is seen as contributing to the checks and balances within a democratic system (Ceva & Mokrosinska, 2022: 379). "In this line of argument, [...] journalism plays a special role by reporting the news of the day, checking abuses of power, and providing a forum for the exchange of ideas relevant to public life" (Garnier et al., 2020: 638). The role as watchdog promises democratic accountability to the people, but if the news media fail to fulfill this role, public officials are not being held responsible for their actions, again negatively impacting democratic functions (Bennett et al., 2007: 130).

Furthermore, while the news media have an interest in staying independent and free, profit-driven outlets also have a demand to meet their sponsors' and shareholders' needs by meeting revenue goals (Trappel et al., 2011: 11). If this is the case, especially in the normative participatory democracy model, the public suffers from not having an unbiased

news media that serves only their interest. So, not just being closely tied to the government is a threat to the news media's unbiased reporting, also its own financing can contribute (Trappel et al., 2011). "This eventually leads to systematic distortions of the public sphere by, for example, privileging groups with higher purchasing power over groups with less, and by structuring the news media supply in accordance with advertising requirements rather than the consumption preferences of the people" (Trappel et al., 2011: 12). Publicly owned traditional news media or news media monitoring, as suggested by Trappel et al. (2011) are possible solutions which would hold the news media accountable in front of the people, nonetheless most news media "(...) are corporate for profit agencies" (Ceva & Mokrosinska, 2022: 380).

But "[j]ournalists become not only gate-keepers of political news, they decide for the people what the really important issues are – and what can be left outside public observation", which means that the public relies heavily on the choices made by the news media (Trappel et al., 2011). This dependency can be problematic when the news media does not fulfill its role responsibly and caters to the interests of the elite instead, highlighting and communicating their perception of certain issues and demands. Such developments pose a significant threat to democracy as conflicting opinions are not represented anymore, and minorities lose their public voice (Sen et al., 2018). This can lead to the normalization of authoritarian language and attitudes, which harm human rights and dismantle democratic ideals from within the public sphere (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022: 719).

## 5. The News Media and Democratic Erosion

### 5.1. Symptoms of Democratic Erosion in the News Media

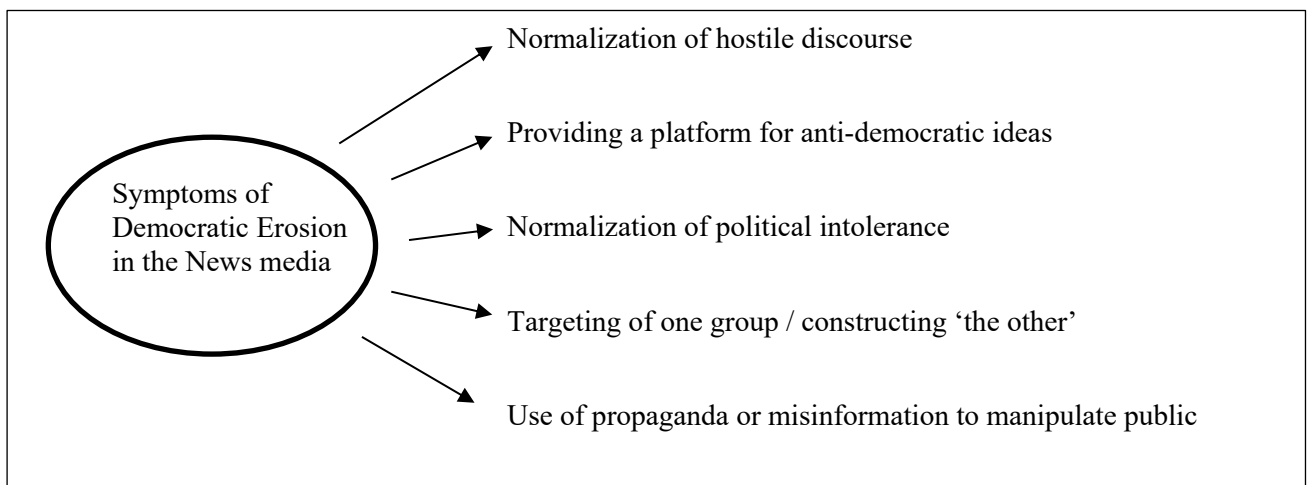
As previous research has not yet clearly defined what symptoms of early democratic erosion are, this sub-chapter provides an account of the matter. It is important to note that this thesis uses the definition of liberal democracy and focuses on obstructing civil liberties as a main constituent of democratic erosion. Therefore, the described symptoms build on that foundation. Employing a different definition of democracy may affect what is regarded as a symptom.

As this thesis focuses on symptoms of democratic erosion within civil liberties, the described symptoms in the following chapter are based on this aspect. As previously established, the obstruction of civil liberties is considered democratic erosion. So, if civil liberties are jeopardized through the normalization of hostile discourse, it can be considered a symptom of early democratic decline. The reason for that is the changing political atmosphere, which is the step before the government takes institutional action by passing discriminating policies or undermining the civil liberties of a certain group. Additionally, the provision of a platform for anti-democratic ideas is a symptom of democratic erosion because it normalizes such thinking and allows the entering of anti-democratic ideas into the public sphere, therefore, undermining fundamental democratic values such as tolerance and pluralism. This can, for example, be represented through the intolerance of foreign religions.

Also, polarization and divisiveness are symptoms of early democratic decline, for example, when societal divisions among ethnic or political lines arise and consensus-building becomes more difficult. This can be represented by the exclusion of certain groups and constructing 'the other'. While this rhetoric can be considered populist, it is important to note here that there are different distinctions of populism within academic research, and the symptoms described here are typical for right-wing populism. This type emphasizes a need for ethnonationalism and, therefore, obstructs the democratic principle of equality (Tushnet, 2019: 389). The rise of this distinct kind of populist language used by political actors or the masses can, therefore, be considered a symptom of early democratic erosion. Relating to this, the normalization of political intolerance among the public, such as the targeting of a group for certain beliefs by political actors, can be considered typical for early democratic erosion as such a broad acceptance of social polarization may lead to the erosion of civil discourse which is crucial to a functioning democracy.

Verbal attacks on the free press by political actors are also characteristics of early democratic erosion because they may aim to undermine the integrity of the news media and try to manipulate public opinion in their favor. Such symptoms can be the use of propaganda or misinformation. As democratic erosion is characterized by the undermining of democratic ideals in a slow and decentralized process, such symptoms often develop unnoticed by defenders of democracy (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018b: 18). An overview of the symptoms of democratic erosion in the news media can be found in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Symptoms of Democratic Erosion in the News Media**



*Note. Designed by thesis author based on chapter 5.1..*

## 5.2. Contributing to Democratic Erosion

As of now, there is no theory on the role of the news media during democratic erosion and how it may be affected. Here it is important to note that democratic erosion is not a fast but a rather slow process which can provide a timeframe for countermeasures when detected early enough (Kneuer, 2021). Due to their previously highlighted functions and key role in a democracy, the news media might have the capacity to counter democratic erosion or contribute to it by failing their normative roles. In an attempt to fill the existing gap, this and the following chapters propose a theoretical framework that explains the potential roles of the news media during early democratic erosion. The point of departure is the knowledge of how the news media can fail their normative roles in a democracy and how ideal and reality differ. Using this knowledge, a deductive approach is applied, which, due to the lack of

existing research on the subject, will deduce how the news media may contribute to or counteract democratic erosion.

The news media contributing to democratic erosion can be looked at from a variety of different angles and displays different symptoms. As this thesis has deduced in the previous chapter, the normalization of anti-democratic discourse and ideas in the public sphere can be a symptom of democratic erosion. By promoting anti-democratic narratives or frames, such ideas can enter the mainstream and undermine democratic values. Referring back to Hallin's (1986) model, the media can contribute to this by moving certain subjects, which have previously not been accepted generally, from the sphere of deviance to the sphere of legitimate controversy. By doing so, they create an opening for discussion and normalize the issue. Whether this maneuver contributes to democratic erosion or not depends on the issue that is being moved. Suppose it is an anti-democratic issue, such as the burning of mosques and attacking of a minority. In that case, the opening of discussions around that subject can contribute to the normalizing of hostility against the targeted group because the media communicate that there is a perspective worth discussing.

Additionally, both the normalization of discriminating language and the use of polarizing rhetoric, which frames certain issues extensively, are symptoms of democratic decline. From a democratic perspective, when populism undermines key democratic components, it can be a symptom of democratic erosion. As the news media's role is the fostering of public discourse and educating people on relevant subjects, biased reporting with the misrepresentation or stereotyping of minorities or other religions can contribute to the manifestation of anti-democratic ideas in the public sphere. The news media's framing of political issues can suggest certain thoughts and shape public opinion (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997: 879). Such a shaping of the public sphere can, in turn, lead to the exclusion or marginalization of minorities, in particular those of a different religion, and symbolize another symptom of early democratic erosion. Using the case of freedom of religion, the distancing from other religions, such as Islam, is paradigmatic. If this process happens with basic democratic principles such as human rights being undermined, for example, when Islamophobic thoughts are distributed or policies discriminating against Islam are passed, democratic decline can be detected.

However, such reporting may not only stem from the news media reflecting on the overall political atmosphere in the country but can also find its origin in specific aims of the elite. Gabel & Scheve (2007) state that if the elite captures the news media, it can lead to biased reporting, which shapes public opinion (Gabel & Scheve, 2007). Democratic ideals become jeopardized when the news media merely act as a microphone for government (Smith &

Sparrow, 2001). Also, providing a stage for politicians with anti-democratic mindsets contributes to the public accepting such ideologies and perceiving them as normality when, in fact, they threaten democratic values (Hafez, 2019). While this focuses on what the news media do in terms of normalizing anti-democratic attitudes, it should also be mentioned what the news media do not do. For example, the lack of calling out anti-democratic statements can lead to the public's acceptance or even support of such thoughts (Ekström et al., 2022). If something is perceived as normal by the news media or politicians, the public tends to accept it. By affecting what people think *about*, the news media also influence *how* they think according to Entman (1989). An example of this statement is the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, after which the United States implemented high-level surveillance of citizens. The news media covered these initiatives extensively and framed them as necessary to protect citizens, which correlated with an overall acceptance among the public (Deflem & McDonough, 2015).

By downplaying opposing viewpoints or covering certain events selectively based on the political agenda of elites, the news media present such practices as acceptable and enable them to enter the mainstream, which can contribute to a normalization of anti-democratic practices and may enable certain parties to gain foot (Ekström et al., 2022). Such behavior also represents the failing of the news media in their role as watchdog, especially when politicians pass discriminating policies or laws and the news media do not denounce it.

This complicity (or perceived neutrality) by the news media is contributing to democratic erosion as they are not fulfilling normative roles such as the watchdog task and are simply reproducing information. This information may be in favor of anti-democratic ideas or misleading the public. For this reason, the author of this thesis argues that the news media cannot be fully neutral with zero influence on democratic erosion as their behavior, no matter if they challenge information or only reproduce it, either counteracts or contributes to the phenomenon.

### 5.3. Counteracting Democratic Erosion

Nonetheless, the news media also have the ability to contribute to counteracting the process of democratic erosion in its early stages. This second dimension of the news media's potential role has different facets. As democratic erosion in the news media can show itself by normalizing anti-democratic language, challenging such rhetoric is one way for the news media to counteract the process. By resisting polarization and abstaining from the use of populist rhetoric, misrepresentation of issues can be avoided. In essence, accurate reports with fact-checked information provide the public with reliable information that can support informed decision-making and thereby foster equal democratic participation. The inclusion of minorities and adequate representation of such groups contribute to an informed society and counters marginalization. The amplifying of different voices in a forum provided by the news media, especially those of minorities, can facilitate dialogue and contribute to the education of the broader public. Confronting authoritarian tendencies can be a way for the news media to counteract democratic erosion. As Dahl (2006) stated, equality is imperative for a democracy, and the news media have the ability to support its fostering. This point connects to the next important task the news media can fulfill in order to counter democratic erosion: the performance of the news media as a watchdog. By informing the public about the happenings within the political realm and challenging hate speech and misinformation, the news media can counteract democratic erosion and contribute to the upkeep of democratic values. This can also be done by providing citizens with tools to discover misinformation and navigate the news media landscape responsibly, thereby promoting news media literacy. Furthermore, again connecting to Hallin's (1986) model, the news media can counteract democratic erosion by keeping certain subjects within the sphere of deviance. For example, if the news media keep anti-democratic ideas within that sphere, it signals an unequivocal understanding that these ideas are not worth discussing and should always be opposed. Or by keeping pro-democratic ideas, for example, the acceptance of gay marriage in the sphere of consensus, the media can contribute to the upholding of such democratic standards. So, by being an actor who upholds their normative roles, the news media can counteract democratic erosion.

By combining previous work on news media and democratic decline, the symptoms in and potential roles of the news media during early democratic erosion have been elaborated in this chapter. Learning about these different functions and how to recognize symptoms can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of democracy and influence education on democracy sustainably. It shines light on what can be done to strengthen democracy and counter democratic decline and helps us to understand ongoing processes around the world.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1. Freedom of Religion as a Case Study

When summarizing democratic erosion in the news media, it becomes clear that the early stages are characterized by the undermining of key democratic concepts. The news media play a crucial role by functioning as an actor or an arena. This thesis adopted the understanding that the threatening of human rights by the news media or public officeholders can be considered a symptom of democratic decline. The reason for this is the argument that “[c]ivil liberties, such as freedoms of speech, press, assembly and travel, likely enhance the diffusion of new ideas into and within a country” and elites try to limit such liberties in an attempt to prolong or enhance their power (Knutsen, 2015: 360). Such threats can assume different shapes, for example, the normalization of discriminating discourse against a minority or religion among the public opinion. To empirically assess the early symptoms of democratic erosion in the news media and what role the news media play, the case of freedom of religion was chosen. The establishment of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic views was chosen as an indicator of non-democratic values being established in the news media, thereby representing symptoms of early democratic erosion.

“Freedom of religion is a democratic right that applies to *all* residents of a country – not just natives and not just those with the historically dominant denominational orientation” (Demker, 2023: 109). Especially since the Second World War, the subject of religious freedom has been essential when measuring democratic values, and it has been grounded in the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as well as the European Convention of Human Rights. Nonetheless, despite being legally established and statutory, freedom of religion has been a topic of debate and conflict in the public sphere (Demker, 2023: 109). Freedom of religion has often been the subject of populist rhetoric used by political parties or the news media who construct the idea of ‘outsiders’ and those who are part of the domestic community in their debates, especially regarding the subject of immigration (Demker, 2023: 112). This leads to the undermining of core democratic virtues “(...) by denying the importance of human rights transformed into civil liberties and the role of brokers and news mediating forces in representative democracy, the rule of law and the integrity of democratic and legal institutions” (Demker, 2023: 112).

One way of freedom of religion being undermined is islamophobia. The term ‘islamophobia’ does not enjoy an unambiguous definition (Mondon & Winter, 2017) which is why a conceptualization before presenting the research design is necessary. “While there is

relative consensus about the growing concern regarding 'Islamophobia' or anti-Muslim hate, there is no consensus on the label or definition" (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 5). The discussion on Islamophobia circles mostly around the focus of either racism or religion, with the British Think Tank 'Runnymede Trust' having developed one of the most used definitions in academia. "Their landmark 1997 report defined Islamophobia as 'an unfounded hostility toward Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims'" (Anderson et al., 2021: 186). Since then, many scholars have offered newer conceptualizations and definitions of Islamophobia, with Mondon and Winter (2017) presenting two kinds of Islamophobia: the illiberal and liberal kind.

Illiberal Islamophobia, according to the authors, is close to traditional racism and presents a monolithic view that includes all Muslims (Mondon & Winter, 2017, p. 12). "It is the construction and containment of a clearly delineated type of Islamophobia at the margins of the political spectrum, one which falls outside of the liberal, mainstream ideal based on a liberal democratic fantasy because of its essentialism, unnews mediated call for violence, total rejection and open discrimination, which make it possible for subtler forms of Islamophobia to enter the mainstream discourse due their apparent allegiance to liberal democratic rules" (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 12). Attacks against Muslims, both in discursive and physical form, as well as appeals for repatriation, and sometimes even genocide, are distinctive of illiberal Islamophobia (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 9). Liberal Islamophobia, in contrast, is based on a defense of the rule of law and distances itself from the roots of traditional racism and hate, focusing on the differences in culture, values, and religion instead (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 12). Thereby, 'good' Muslims, those who adhere to Western ideals, are recognized, and an apparent inclusion of other religious or ethnic groups is allowed (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 14). "In its self-proclaimed yet limited opposition to the reviled 'racists', 'sexists' and 'fundamentalists' of all kinds, it enables far greater mainstream and even progressive acceptance" (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 15).

This conceptualization is of relevance for this thesis because it can be aligned with the polarization and normalization of Islamophobia in the Swedish news media. Illiberal Islamophobia, as the authors describe it, has polarizing characteristics, whereas liberal Islamophobia can be aligned with the normalization of Islamophobia in the mainstream. The discourse around Islam is used as an example to determine if symptoms of democratic erosion are present in the news media and what role the news media play.

## 6.2. Sweden as a Case Study

Sweden was chosen as a case study to apply the developed theoretical framework empirically because it is a liberal democracy and ranked as one of the strongest democracies in the world (Freedom House, 2024). Despite enjoying the international image of a stable nation with a strong respect for human rights, its recent political developments follow the overall trend of right-wing parties gaining traction and joining the respective parliaments. Furthermore, “[m]edia discussions on religious freedom have often centered on Islam as a foreign or ‘new’ religion in Sweden” with Islam receiving most disapproval out of any other religion in Sweden according to the SOM-Institute, an independent research station in Sweden (Demker, 2023: 116-119). Adding to this are the recent upheavals in the nation, which started when different individuals started burning Qurans, leading to many Muslim nations condemning Sweden and violent protests throughout the country (Al Jazeera, 2023).

“In Sweden, human rights are guaranteed by three of the four constitutional laws: the Instrument of Government, the Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression” (Sandberg, 2002: 107). Having the image of a frontrunner when it comes to human rights, Sweden enjoys a very positive reputation in the international world (Hagelund, 2020: 15). Starting from 1951, Freedom of religion as a human right was fully achieved in Sweden and “(...) is protected under Chapter 2, sections 1 and 2 of (Sandberg, 2002: 113) nowadays, meaning that individuals can practice their beliefs without the fear of prosecution. Currently, “Sweden is often described – rightly so, according to data – as one of the most secularized countries in the world” (Demker, 2023: 107). However, while freedom of religion is constitutionally protected as a human right, it has become the object of an ongoing debate in the public sphere in Sweden (Demker, 2023: 109). Already since 2011, but especially after the refugee influx in 2015, the negative attitudes towards refugees and the religion of Islam increased rapidly, resulting in negative sentiments among the public regarding the immigration issue and non-native religions (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 68). These sentiments are not just expressed by the right-wing populist parties but can be detected across the whole political spectrum (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 68). “Both news media and political parties have used populist rhetoric in debates discussing religious freedom in the case of immigrants” (Demker, 2023: 109). Uncivil ideas, as well as language, have been swapping over into the mainstream news media, with immigration issues being most important, thereby following the trends that have also been present in other European countries (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 67-68).

With immigration issues being a new priority, right-wing parties such as the Sweden Democrats ('Sverige Demokraterna') have been able to gain popularity and votes through populist rhetoric, namely by portraying Muslims as an outsider group which threatens Swedish values (Janssen, 2023: 1). The Swedish Democrats are the second-largest political party as of now and are known for expressing anti-Islamic views. The party has been particularly mentioned in the Freedom House Country Report 2024 as a threat to religious freedom in Sweden because of its political views (Freedom House, 2024). Also, among the Swedish public, the support for the religious freedom of refugees or immigrants has been measured as rather low, despite it being a human right that finds its legal defense in the democratic laws of the country (Demker, 2023: 119). Just recently, scholars have found Islam to be "(...) the most disliked religion in Sweden" (Demker, 2023: 117). These sentiments have consequences.

In 2024, the Freedom House country report on Sweden identified "[r]ecent challenges [such as] increases in violent crime; religiously motivated hate speech and vandalism against Muslim, Jewish, and other targets; and struggles to integrate and create opportunities for foreign-born residents" (Freedom House, 2024). The European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency has raised concerns as well in regard to a rise of hatred towards Islam as a religion across Europe, especially recognizing increasing trends in Sweden (Demker, 2023: 117). It is important to note that "[h]istorical research shows that mass news media play a crucial role in enabling public acceptance of racism and xenophobia (...), and that news media are key institutions in the process of normalizing xenophobic and racist utterances" (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021: 69). The charged attitudes towards immigrants and Islam as a religion and the consequential dismissal of a core human right in the public sphere are further evidence of the importance of analyzing the role of the news media during the early stages of democratic decline.

As early democratic erosion represents itself, among other aspects, through the distribution of anti-democratic thoughts in the public sphere, Sweden's news media landscape is an ideal case to find answers to the research questions. Such a case study is a promising start to understanding more about the patterns of early democratic erosion in the news media and, in turn, use the knowledge to inform on the phenomenon of democratic erosion.

### 6.3. Research Design

As the focus of this thesis is to capture potential symptoms of democratic erosion in the news media and assess which role the news media play, research in this thesis is being performed through a mixed methods approach by using quantitative content analysis (QCA) and complementing it with a qualitative analysis of selected articles to demonstrate an in-depth analysis of the symptoms. Combining the two methods provides a more holistic understanding, and context-based can be detected. The codebook for the QCA was created based on the symptoms discussed in earlier chapters, using variables that allow the discovery of frequencies and patterns in regard to the symptoms of early democratic erosion as well as the role of the news media.

The focus is on the dynamics of public discourse around Islam, which was chosen as a representative of the human right of freedom of religion. Therefore, the main subject of the following research will be a case study on the presentation of Islam and Muslims in the Swedish news media. To capture the development of the topic, a longitudinal approach was chosen for the quantitative analysis, and news reports from the year 2016 until 2023 will be included. By assessing these dynamics over the years, answers to the research questions will be provided, and a first understanding of the role of news media and democratic erosion is obtained.

### 6.4. Strengths of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

By combining two methods, this thesis integrates the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative research. While the quantitative part provides a longitudinal overview that enables pattern recognition, the qualitative method can offer insights into the underlying power dynamics and social structures that are embedded in a news report. This adds up to a more comprehensive understanding of the symptoms of early democratic erosion and can enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis conducted in this thesis.

“Quantitative content analysis [QCA] is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning., or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (Riffe et al., 1998, p. 20). The advantage of this method is its flexibility, which allows its application in a variety of different contexts and disciplines. Adding to that, another strength of the method is

that a "(...) researcher can draw conclusions from content evidence without having to gain access to communicators who may be unwilling or unable to be examined directly" (Riffe et al., 1998, p. 30). This enables beneficial independence, which adds to the methods of non-obtrusiveness and non-reactiveness (Riffe et al., 1998, p. 30). Furthermore, since QCA can rely on previously published or recorded content, it is suitable for longitudinal studies (Riffe et al., 1998, p. 31). This makes it a suitable method for the research aims of this thesis.

In the qualitative method, language is analyzed in relation to the context it is being used in (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). The main objective of qualitative research according to scholars Bloor and Bloor (2013) is "(...) to analyze discourse practices that reflect or construct social problems; to investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and find ways to break the ice [and] to increase awareness of how to apply these objectives to specific cases of injustice, prejudice, and misuse of power" (Bloor & Bloor, 2013, p. 12). One advantage of analyzing articles qualitatively is that the method can address issues on both the macro and the micro level, allowing for a rather broad bandwidth of what it can be used for (Bloor & Bloor, 2013, p. 12). Furthermore, qualitative analysis of content considers the political and societal context in which a language is used and how societal domains are constructed, allowing for a deep analysis (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). However, because the method relies on frames, the researcher is confronted with the question of which frame to apply. Therefore, qualitative research has been criticized for the relevance of the chosen context, which is a subjective decision made by the researcher as the selection of the context is often not part of the investigation (Blommaert, 2001, p. 5).

## 6.5. Sampling

Using the largest news media archive in the Nordics called 'Retriever', online articles from the Swedish tabloid news outlet Aftonbladet (AB) and broadsheet news outlet Svenska Dagbladet (SvD) were sampled. As the public does not focus merely on broadsheets but also consumes tabloids, including one of each provides an improved understanding of what the audiences are exposed to. The choice to focus on online articles is not just based on the easier accessibility but also on the rational assumption that most articles are published both in print and online, so focusing on the online version will not lead to a loss of knowledge and simultaneously avoid the sampling of two similar items. AB was chosen as it is the biggest tabloid in Sweden, and SvD is the second biggest broadsheet, with a reading audience of 788 thousand people in 2022 alone (Watson, 2023). The biggest broadsheet, called Dagens Nyheter, was not selected for the sampling process due to insufficient access to its online

archives. As the aim of the thesis is not to test the hypothesized role of the news media during the early stages of democratic erosion but rather to explore how symptoms of early democratic erosion can be seen in a democracy labeled as 'stable', the analysis of two major outlets is representative of the public sphere and is sufficient in this case.

The online articles of the news outlets were filtered using 'Retriever' with the two search words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' within the time period from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of the year 2016 until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December in the year 2023. The time frame was chosen as 2016 marks the year after the sudden refugee influx in 2015, which led to Sweden, one of the countries with the most asylum seekers, having to deal with subjects such as the integration of different religions and cultures. Furthermore, the right-wing Swedish Democrats Party continued gaining votes and popularity among the public (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). This signifies an interesting change in the Swedish political environment, which makes the following years crucial in the assessment of early democratic erosion.

Using 'Retriever', further filters were applied, which selected only online articles from AB and SvD (both premium and openly accessible articles). A manual screening that disregarded any type of article except news reports and opinion pieces by Swedish journalists and political actors led to a total of 687 articles (for SvD 332 and for AB 355). The reason for the inclusion of both news and opinion articles is the aim of the thesis to capture the role of news media regarding democratic erosion. As they can contribute to democratic erosion by being a microphone for the elite, opinion pieces are helpful in detecting whether this is the case or not. Only the textual parts of the news report were regarded, so visual or acoustic elements were dismissed because the thesis focuses on discourse. All articles were written and published in the Swedish language.

When analyzing the content quantitatively, the articles were sorted into four different types (news article, opinion piece, editorial article, or news commentary) and then coded for 13 different variables, which can be divided into three notional sections. Firstly, the main topic was distinguished between talking about the freedom of speech, Islamism, or the denial of freedom of religion. If Islamism was selected as a main subject, a sub-variable regarding the distinction between Islam and Islamism was applied. If the denial of freedom of religion was selected, a sub-variable asking if there was any pushback against such denial was coded. Then, the juxtaposing of Islam and violence, liberal and illiberal islamophobia were coded. If liberal islamophobia was selected to be displayed in the article, a sub-variable regarding whether there was any pushback was applied. If illiberal islamophobia was selected, a sub-variable asking about whether there was any pushback or not was used. Lastly, the

variables asked if Islam was depicted positively or negatively or if the article homogenized Muslims as an outgroup.

These variables are useful to detect symptoms of democratic erosion in the news media and display what role the news media might play in the case of freedom of religion. In addition to these more obvious variables directly regarding potential symptoms, freedom of speech was further selected as a potential main topic because it is a fundamental civil liberty that can support or obstruct human rights, such as the freedom of religion. Real-life examples of the importance of including freedom of speech as a variable are the recent Quran burnings in Sweden, which were protected by police and defended in the name of freedom of speech despite openly insulting Islam and spreading anti-democratic thoughts.

To complete the QCA, a qualitative analysis was done to identify exemplary articles displaying the coded symptoms. In this case, the articles are analyzed for the pre-determined symptoms of the quantitative analysis, and then exemplary excerpts are presented alongside the discussion of the quantitative analysis. This allows an in-depth analysis of the political context, how the symptoms can be interpreted, and what it means in connection to early democratic erosion. Especially in regard to the exploratory nature of this study, such a qualitative analysis enhances the understanding of the different symptoms. It contributes to a more comprehensive foundation of the subject, which can be spun further in future research.

## 6.6. Reliability, Validity, and Limitations

This exploratory thesis applies Holsti's method formula to ensure intra-coder reliability among coders. "In this method, if two coders independently code a set of documents using the same coding scheme, the coefficient of reliability of those two coders is the percentage of agreements of the total number of coding decisions made by the two coders" (Mao, 2017: 741). For this thesis, the author recoded 5% of the articles to test reliability. The Holsti index is, despite its limitations being that it does not calculate chance, a fitting choice for this thesis because it calculates based on nominal data. As this thesis is exploratory, linear correlations such as Pearson's R are not tested, which further argues for the use of Holsti's Method Formula (Mao, 2017: 743). The index range is 0 to 1, with all variables receiving a score of over 0.9, indicating high interrater reliability (Mao, 2017).

Nonetheless, a second reliability test with Cohen's Kappa was completed, which has a range from -1 to +1 (Hawk & Raju, 1991). The reasoning for this is that Cohen's Kappa calculates

chance and, therefore, balances out the limitations of Holsti's Method Formula (Owen, 2024). By applying two indices, more accurate results are provided.

34 (roughly 5%) articles of the main sample of 687 articles were recoded by the author, following the instructions of the codebook for the symptoms of democratic erosion. The categorization for the type of article was not included in the recoding process because this does not reflect the actual symptoms and accuracy of the codebook. Afterward, the two indices were calculated for each variable. The results for Holsti's Method indicated a generally very high agreement, which can be interpreted as a consistent application of the codebook. More detailed information can be found in Table 4 in the appendix. For Cohen's Kappa, most variables received over 0.6, which can be interpreted as depicting a substantial agreement. However, two variables (*liberal islamophobia and outgroup*) received a Cohen's Kappa score lower than 0.6, indicating ambiguity in the codebook. These are limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results of the analysis. For exact numbers, please refer to Table 5 in the appendix.

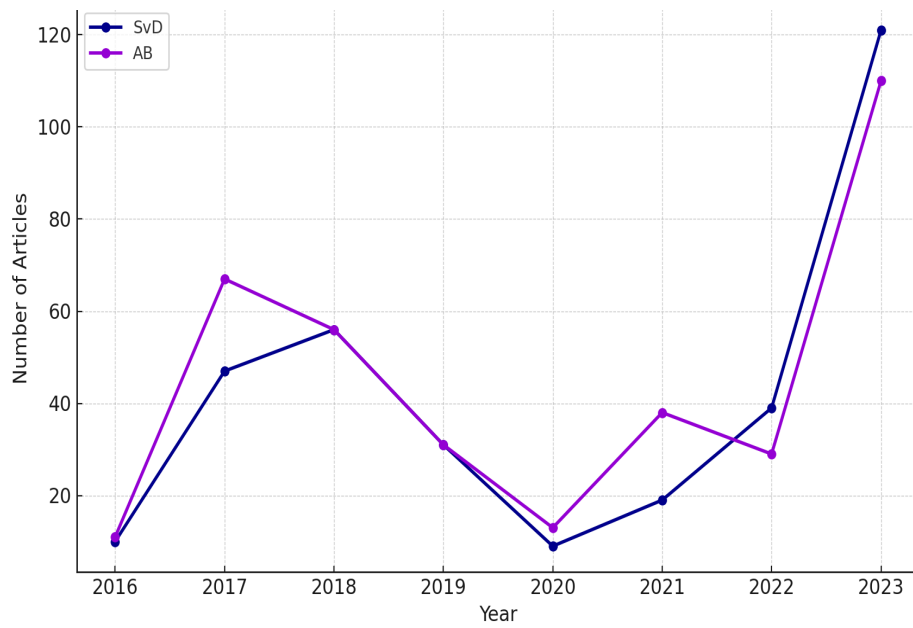
A triangulation of multiple sources demonstrates the accuracy of the theoretical constructs used in this thesis. This means that a qualitative analysis of selected articles is conducted in addition to the quantitatively calculated and interpreted data, specifically analyzing the coded symptoms. Both reliability and validity are increased through the depth of the qualitative analysis and the width of the quantitative analysis (Teorell, 2007).

## 7. Results

In this chapter, alongside the discussion of the results of the quantitative analysis, different excerpts of articles displaying various symptoms of early democratic erosion are presented for deeper insights. As all articles were published in Swedish, the presented quotes are direct translations completed by the thesis author. While differentiations between the various article types are made in the qualitative analysis, the quantitative analysis refrains from doing so. The reason for this is the aim to capture broader trends and patterns across the news media outlets, and since the research questions are concerned with the news media's overall behavior to define their role, this approach is adequate for the quantitative analysis. Furthermore, all forms of news media content contribute to the patterns this thesis aims to uncover, regardless of what the article is formally classified as. In the qualitative analysis, however, the type of article is highlighted to see who wrote it. This knowledge is relevant to deepen the understanding of the discourse dynamics on the subject of Islam and Muslims. It is also important to note that Sweden has undergone essential changes in government throughout the analyzed period. "The Swedish parliamentary election of 11 September 2022 led to the removal of a Social Democratic government and the installation of a right-of-center coalition" (Aylott & Bolin, 2023, p. 1049). The right-wing party, Sweden Democrats, became Sweden's second-biggest party that year, leading to political actors expressing worries about Swedish democracy (Aylott & Bolin, 2023, p. 1060). This is due to the extremist elements in the Sweden Democrats party and its roots in traditional racism (Aylott & Bolin, 2023, p. 1060).

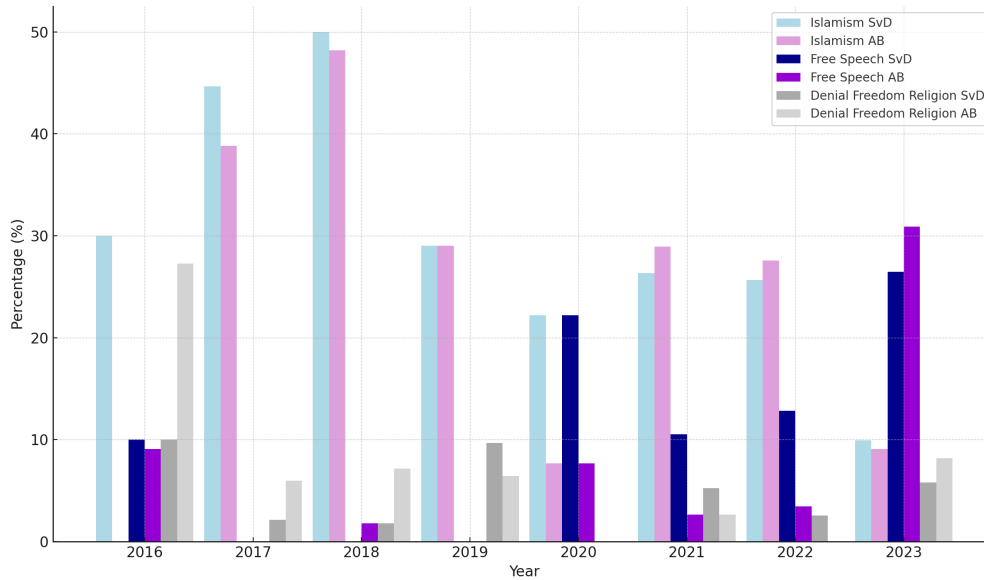
As can be seen in **Figure 4**, the distribution of released articles, including the keywords 'Muslim' or 'Islam' in SvD and AB, is uneven over the selected period. After a slight rise in articles from 2016 to 2017, a decline can be discovered in both outlets, which finds its lowest point in 2020 with under 20 articles. Afterward, the number of articles using the words 'Muslim' or 'Islam' in SvD rose steeply. In contrast, the number of articles in AB experienced a slight dip in 2022 before reaching the highest number in 2023 with over 100 articles for both outlets, respectively. The reasons for this observation are not disclosed. Still, they might be related to archiving issues of the news outlets or influential incidents such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which pushed other issues into the background. Therefore, the decision was made to present the frequencies of the chosen variables in percentage throughout the following charts to be able to compare them more reliably. Generally, both news media outlets follow the same rough pattern over time regarding the frequency of articles, including the words 'Muslim' or 'Islam'. The total number of articles published by SvD is 332; for AB, the number is 355.

**Figure 4: Distribution of Articles for SvD and AB**



Note. Graph based on data extracted during the sampling phase of the quantitative content analysis. Depicting frequencies of articles containing the keywords 'Muslim' or 'Islam'. N = 332 for SvD, N = 355 for AB.

**Figure 5: Frequencies of Distribution of Main Topics in SvD and AB**



Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 332 for SvD, N = 355 for AB.

**Figure 5** shows the distribution of main topics in the two outlets. While stories on Islamism dominated between 2016 and 2022 in SvD (with the exception of 2020), the subject of free speech became the most important topic in 2023, after having experienced a sudden rise in 2020. Subjects such as the denial of freedom of religion towards Muslims were not as present throughout these years and stayed under 10% during the entire time period. This differs from AB, where the denial of freedom of religion to Muslims was the most frequent main topic in 2016. However, this changed rapidly when Islamism became the most common main topic in 2017, with almost 40% and staying at the top until 2022 (with the exception of 2020). In 2023, freedom of speech was the most frequent main topic in AB as well.

But, to see whether the media fulfill their role of informing the public, all articles that had the main topic of Islamism were coded with a sub-variable to determine whether they made a distinction between Islam as a world religion and Islamism as an extremist strand of the religion. This variable is important because it shows whether extreme formations of Islam are presented as related to the main religion or if an educational differentiation is being made. Therefore, this variable directly relates to the normative roles of the news media and whether they fulfill their purpose of informing or not. **Figure 6** depicts the frequencies of articles that were coded with 'yes, making a distinction'. As AB did not have any articles on the main subject of Islamism in 2016, there was no column for AB that year. However, when looking at the other columns, it becomes clear that distinctions were not made as consistently until 2023, with 2017 - 2022 being under 50% for AB. In 2020, no distinctions were made at all between AB and SvD. Except for a minimal difference in 2017, SvD has consistently made more distinctions between Islam and Islamism than AB, a number that only changed in 2023.

An example of a successful differentiation can be found in an editorial article published by SvD in 2023. The article quotes the following statement:

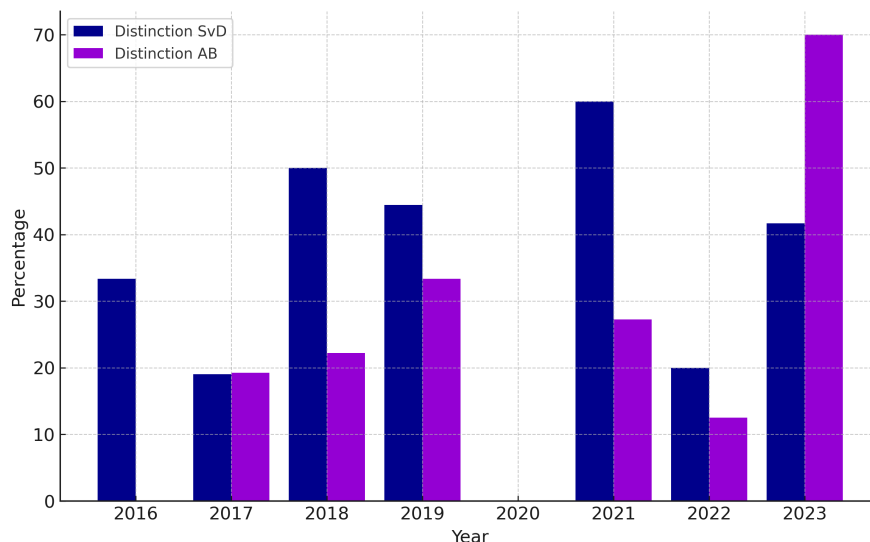
*"Islamism is not a religion; it is a political ideology. Those who are Islamists want Islam to be the guiding principle for politics or for society's norms. Much like Lewi Petrus once wished when he formed a political party, albeit a Christian one".*

This sentence provides a clear definition of Islamism, and the outlet fulfills its normative role of educating the public and enabling healthy debates. However, an opinion article written by Ebba Busch (party leader of the Christian Democrats) published by AB in 2020, fails to highlight such a differentiation. She uses the words Islamist and Islam interchangeably. Examples of this are the following two sentences in which she first describes the influence of Islam on Sweden by other countries but then refers to Muslim-ruled countries as Islamist without differentiating between the two terms:

*“To protect fundamental freedoms the influence of Islam in Sweden needs to be stopped. Today it is free for Islamist-ruled states to build, own and operate mosques and finance imams in Sweden”.*

While AB merely published her opinion piece and did not actively miss to differentiate between ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’, the news media outlet failed its normative role of being an educator for the public by having acted as a mere microphone for the party leader in this instance. Even though this example indicates early symptoms of democratic erosion, it is important to note that AB highlighted distinctions between ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ more dutifully in 2023 with a frequency of around 70%, implying a positive change in the outlet. Such high numbers are indicative of counteracting democratic erosion in its early stages.

**Figure 6: Frequencies of Articles making a Distinction between Islam and Islamism**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Displays frequencies of articles coded ‘1’ (yes) for making a distinction between Islam and Islamism. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 90 for SvD, N = 92 for AB.*

In 2023, the focus on Islamism as a main topic changed, with freedom of speech becoming the most frequently discussed subject in both AB and SvD. An example of such a main topic is a news article from 2023 which was released by AB, in which Richard Jomshof from the Sweden Democrats is quoted defending his Islamophobic tweets by highlighting the importance of freedom of speech in a democracy:

*“ We must be able to have opinions, strong ones too, that is a foundation of democracy, he says’, he tells TV4 Nyheterna (...) ‘I agree that we need a ‘broader dialogue’, a dialogue*

*about how we democratize the Muslim world. Or why not a dialogue about Islam, this anti-democratic, pro-violence and misogynist religion/ideology, founded by the warlord, mass murderer, slave trader and the robber Muhammed”.*

This quote highlights the issues of democratic erosion and current debate in Sweden: how should someone who uses a democratic law such as the freedom of speech as a right to attack a minority or other religion in an anti-democratic manner be handled? Jomshof's statement displays four symptoms of early democratic erosion. He normalizes hostile discourse, contributes to anti-democratic ideas entering the public sphere, and normalizes political intolerance by targeting one specific group. Nonetheless, it is important to note that AB did not just publish Jomshof's statement but also included criticism from other parties in the article:

*“After this, several from the opposition parties have demanded Jomshof's resignation. - His actions endanger Sweden's security, says Ardalan Shekarabi (Social Democrats)”.*

The inclusion of opposing views is an important difference between the news media being merely a microphone for politicians or being an actor who contributes to shaping the public sphere. In this particular case, the news media fulfil their normative role of being a discussion forum and presenting different perspectives.

But, to analyze the role of the news media even better, a third main topic that directly assesses the denial of freedom of religion towards Muslims was selected, including a variable to see how many articles display a pushback against such a denial. The articles coded with the main topic 'Denial of Freedom of Religion towards Muslims' were coded using a sub-variable to determine how many articles pushed back against such a denial. This variable was selected because of its essentialness regarding the standing up for freedom of religion, a right anchored in the Swedish constitution, and the normative role of the news media as a watchdog and challenger of the elite. If such a pushback does not happen, it can be interpreted as a symptom of early democratic erosion because a human right (in this case freedom of religion) is being undermined without resistance from either the news media or the public. The news media reporting on the pushback is just as important as external actors pushing back because it means that the audience is being informed on alternative reactions.

**Figure 7** shows the frequencies of articles that were coded with 'yes, pushing back'. As no articles were coded with that main topic in 2020 (for both outlets), there are no columns for that year. Except for 2017 and 2019, SvD has been pushing back against such a denial with

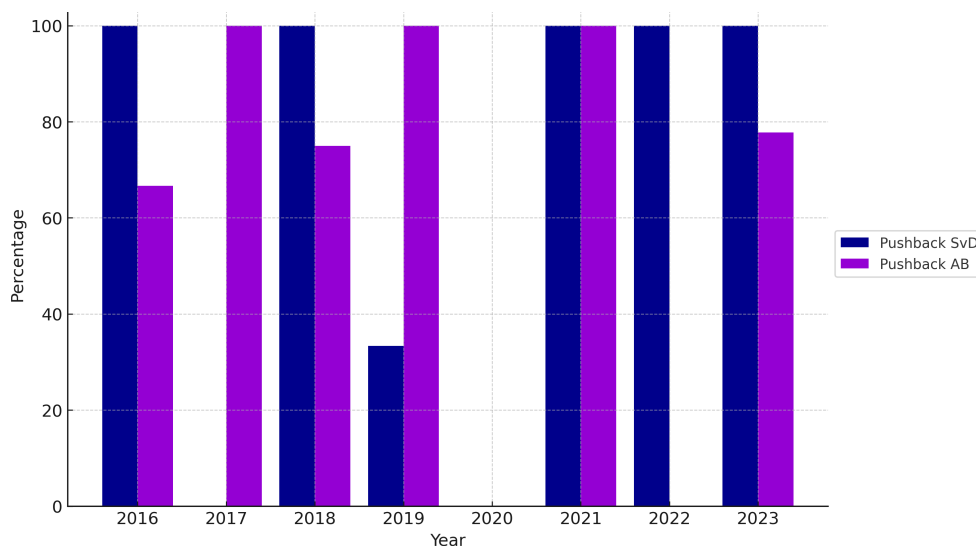
a full 100%, meaning that each article with that main topic has included some form of pushback against the denial of freedom towards Muslims, either from external actors or the news media. AB has also had frequent pushback, with all years depicting a pushback in 60% of the articles coded with that main subject. This is true except for 2020, when no articles on that main topic were published at all.

A news article published in 2023 by SvD displays such a pushback against denying Muslims their freedom of religion. After talking about Jimmie Åkesson’s claim to pass a law that maps Muslim communities and forbids the building of new Mosques, the news article provides Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson a stage:

*“The Prime Minister believes that Åkesson’s words were irresponsible [and replies that] ‘Sweden stands up fully for religious freedom. You can be a Christian, Jew, Muslim, or any other faith. And you can choose to have no faith at all. We must stand up for that’”.*

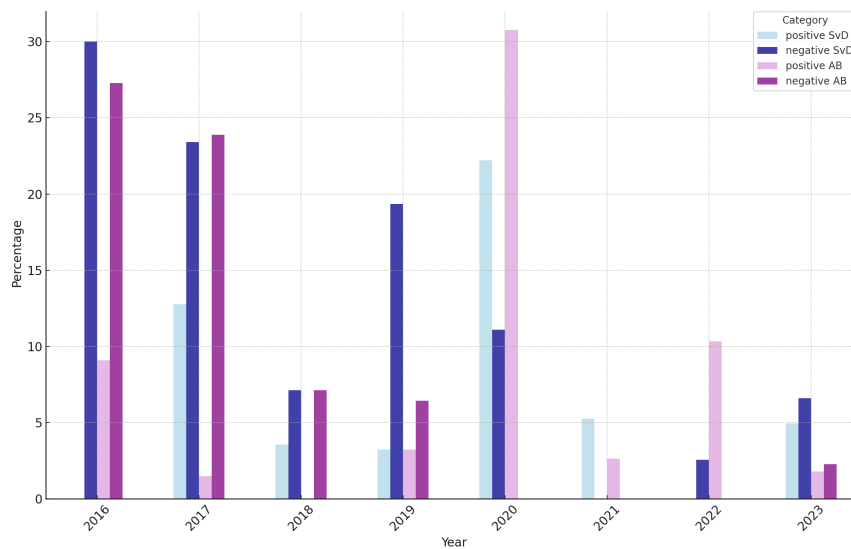
This statement exemplifies how democratic erosion can be counteracted by the news media by giving a political actor the chance to highlight the human right of religious freedom and criticize anti-democratic statements. This way, democratic values are emphasized and presented to the public.

**Figure 7: Frequencies of Articles pushing back against Denial of Freedom of Religion towards Muslims**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Displays frequencies of articles coded ‘1’ (yes) for pushing back against the denial of freedom of religion towards Muslims. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 17 for SvD, N = 23 for AB.*

**Figure 8: Frequencies of Articles depicting Islam negatively or positively**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 332 for SvD, N = 355 for AB.*

**Figure 8** displays how often Islam was presented as either negative or positive in SvD and AB. As democratic erosion can show itself by undermining a certain group and targeting it, this variable provides insights into how the news media treat Islam as a religion. Both SvD and AB reported on Islam in a negative light in 2016 and 2017. However, SvD consistently went down in their frequencies until 2023, when a slight peak was detectable, with the years 2020 – 2022 showing no negative portrayal at all. AB, in contrast, portrayed Islam negatively to some extent every year except 2021. Regarding the positive depiction of Islam, both outlets show a clear rise in 2020 (over 20% for both), with other years being rather low, showing numbers steadily under 15%. SvD has zero articles describing Islam in a positive light in 2016 and 2022, and AB depicted Islam only negatively in 2018. However, the frequencies for both a negative and positive description of Islam plummeted in 2023, indicating a more neutral tone.

Just as important when assessing symptoms of democratic erosion is the way Islam is portrayed in the news media, as this can influence how the public perceives and subsequently treats the religion. Therefore, the next applied variable analyzed the frequencies of both negative and positive portrayals of the world religion. Exemplary for a positive portrayal of Islam is an editorial article published by AB in 2023, where the positive sides of Islam are highlighted, and the author Jona Sima argues for the acceptance of other religions:

*“Actually, we would all benefit from celebrating some kind of Ramadan. A time used to focus on the soul, solidarity with the weak, and on cherishing our relationships. Instead of pointing the finger at other religions, we could be inspired by the good sides”.*

A negative portrayal of Islam, in comparison, can be found in another editorial article which was published by SvD in 2023 and presents the story of a young gay man from Turkey, who cannot live freely regarding his sexuality because of his religious and cultural background:

*“He is not open to his family about his sexuality, and he doesn't think he will ever tell them. - Because of culture, religion, and lots of other things, he says. They would not react well. It would never be accepted. Just like his parents, Yusuf is a devout Muslim”.*

By presenting such restrictions, the article highlights the disadvantages of Islam which limit personal and sexual freedom, and puts them in contrast to Swedish society:

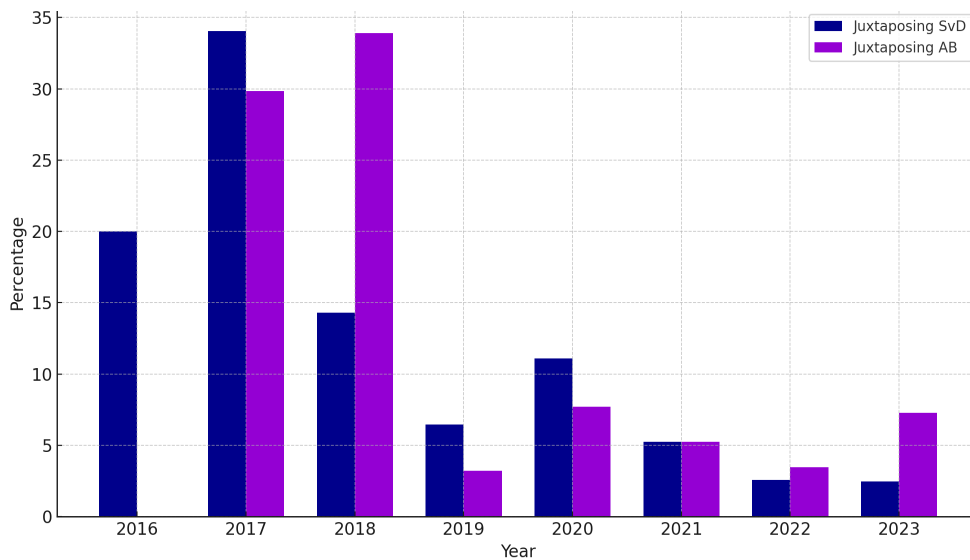
*“The cultural distance to Sweden - one of the world's most tolerant and progressive countries - is great. It is therefore obvious that a culture clash occurs when people come here from the Middle East and Africa”.*

Such a presentation is not beneficial when trying to create a more inclusive public environment based on democratic ideals because it puts Swedish culture on a pedestal and tells the audience how disadvantageous being a Muslim can be. By publishing such articles, the Swedish news media contributes to a more polarized and fragmented environment, which enables democratic erosion.

However, these results only perceive how the world religion of Islam is directly portrayed in an article and does not focus on the context in which Islam is talked about. Indirect negative attributions are not captured, which is why different variables have to be kept in mind when interpreting these results in order to receive a holistic understanding. For example, the distinction between Islam and Islamism is indicative of the context and how Islam is being perceived (not portrayed). The difference between perception and actual portrayal needs to be regarded, as the article might portray Islam neutrally. However, the reader still perceives the religion as negative because of the context in which it is being discussed. To shed more light on this, the variable of whether Islam and violence are juxtaposed was added. This is important when trying to learn more about democratic erosion as the presentation of Islam in a certain context can affect how the public thinks about the religion and subsequently treat

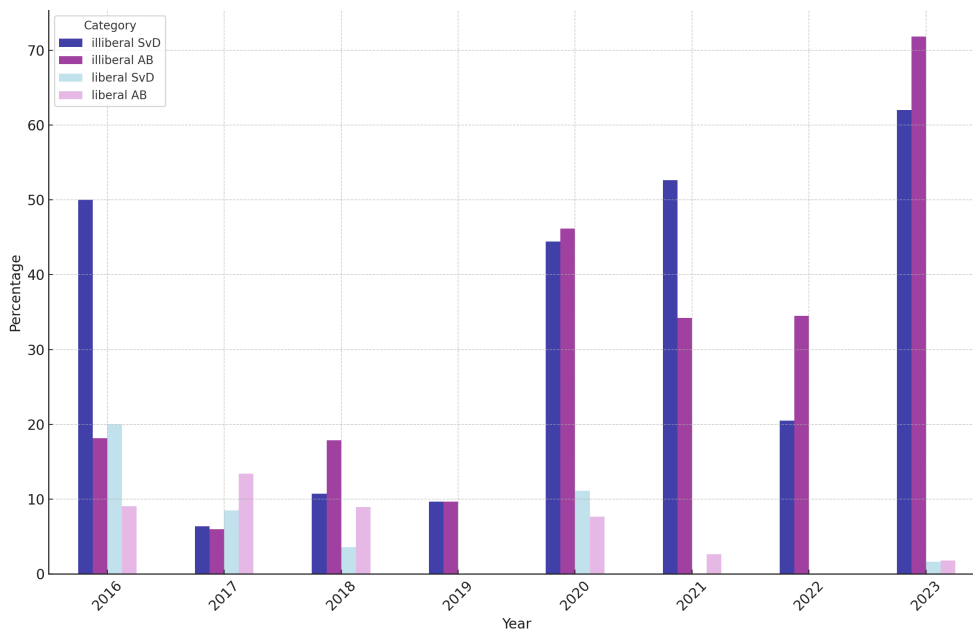
Muslims and their right to freedom of religion. As can be seen in **Figure 9**, SvD displays frequencies of over 10% from 2016 – 2018, peaking at almost 35% in 2017. After that, the numbers keep dropping (except for a small rise in 2020) and display the lowest frequencies in the last recorded year of 2023. AB, in comparison, did not publish any articles juxtaposing Islam and violence in 2016 but rose quickly to around 30% in 2017. 2018 displayed another increase to almost 35% percent, however after that year, the numbers stayed consistently below 10%. In 2023, AB's frequencies reach roughly 8%. Both SvD and AB see an overall decline in comparing Islam and violence since 2017.

**Figure 9: Frequencies of Articles juxtaposing Islam and Violence**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Frequencies depicted in percentage N = 332 for SvD, N = 355 for AB.*

**Figure 10: Frequencies of Articles displaying Illiberal and Liberal Islamophobia**



*Note.* Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Frequencies depicted in percentage.  $N = 332$  for SvD,  $N = 355$  for AB.

The next variable selected was whether the articles displayed illiberal or liberal islamophobia. Islamophobia, whether it's direct or underlying, signifies the entering of anti-democratic ideas into the public sphere and the potential normalization of hostile discourse, both symptoms of democratic erosion. As shown in **Figure 10**, both SvD and AB display almost no liberal islamophobia, with illiberal islamophobia being distinctively more frequent in both outlets. Both outlets experienced the highest peak of illiberal islamophobia in 2023 and their lowest in 2017. The lowest frequencies of displays of illiberal islamophobia are between 2017 and 2019. Liberal islamophobia is not as frequent in both outlets, with SvD experiencing the highest frequencies in 2016 and AB in 2017. 2023 showed very low frequencies for liberal islamophobia for both SvD and AB. However, here it is important to stress the low results of the reliability calculations (Cohen's Kappa) presented previously for the variable 'liberal islamophobia'. Liberal islamophobia is quite subtle and usually embedded in rationalized contexts, which makes it harder to identify despite very precise directions in the codebook. Therefore, the results for this variable are to be interpreted with more caution. Still, the overall very low numbers of articles displaying liberal islamophobia in both news media outlets suggest a low percentage of normalization of islamophobia amongst the Swedish mainstream.

An example of liberal islamophobia can be found in a news article published by AB in 2023, which provides a stage for Muharrem Demirok, the party leader of the Center Party. His cultural background is highlighted, with a special emphasis on the fact that he is a secular Muslim – someone who adheres to Sweden’s secular nature:

*“Demirok’s father is from Turkey, and Muharrem Demirok likes to describe himself as a cultural Muslim.*

*- I am not someone who goes to the mosque particularly often. I have realized that I am not very religious.*

*- If you are born into a culture, you carry traditions with you that are religiously connected, such as celebrating certain holidays. I bring the cultural elements with me, while the religious becomes less important”.*

This is an example of liberal islamophobia because it highlights a Muslim who follows Western values, in this case, the secularity Sweden is known for. He fits in culturally despite having a different belief because his religion does not dictate his life. Illiberal islamophobia, in contrast, directly attacks the religion of Islam and discriminates it.

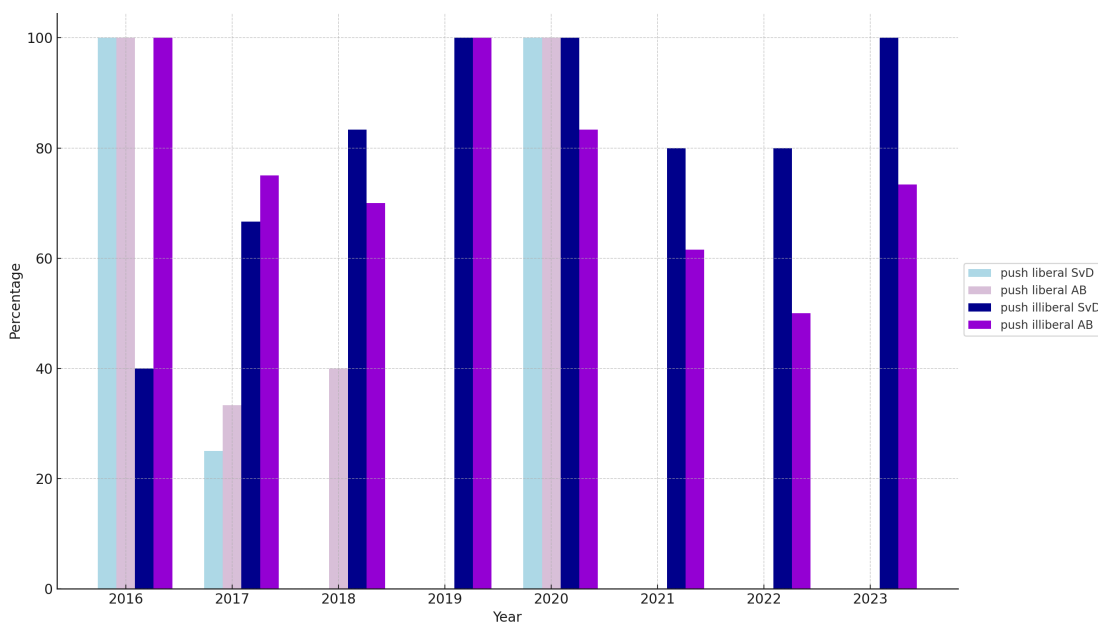
In 2023, SvD published a news article in which the outlet quoted Richard Jomshof from the Swedish Democrats:

*”I agree that we need a 'broader dialogue', a dialogue about how we democratize the Muslim world. Or why not a dialogue about Islam, this anti-democratic, violent and misogynistic religion/ideology, founded by the warlord, mass murderer, slave trader and robber Muhammad”.*

With this statement, which he released on an online platform and SvD cited in their article, the Swedish Democrat openly attacks the religion and insults it. Because the news media’s role as a watchdog is to challenge the opinions of the elite, such as this statement by Jomshof, and create a forum for public criticism and discussion, it is important to analyze the pushback against islamophobia to obtain a more holistic picture. Therefore, all articles displaying either sort of islamophobia were coded on whether they displayed pushback against islamophobia. Importantly, when an article is coded ‘yes’ for displaying liberal or illiberal islamophobia, it does not automatically mean the newspaper itself is Islamophobic, as such statements can be made by other external actors and simply published by the news media outlet. To determine whether the outlet is counteracting or contributing to democratic erosion, the variable of pushback against liberal or illiberal islamophobia becomes crucial. It

is decisive of whether the news media are a mere microphone for certain actors or if they present alternative viewpoints and oppose the Islamophobic statements. As can be seen in **Figure 11**, the pushback against illiberal islamophobia has been high throughout the years for both outlets, with AB being consistently at or over 50% every year and SvD showing the same pattern but with 40%. This indicates a high pushback against illiberal Islamophobic actions or statements, either by the news media outlet itself or by external actors with the news media presenting the pushback. Even if the news media don't oppose islamophobia personally, also the reporting on such protests can be considered an important pushback as the public is informed of opposing views and alternative perspectives are provided. The frequencies for the pushback on liberal islamophobia differ. SvD only presented pushback in 3 different years (2016, 2017, 2020), despite having articles display liberal islamophobia in two additional years (2018, 2023). There is no pushback in 2022 as neither outlet released articles containing liberal islamophobia. In 2023, no pushback was recorded either despite both AB and SvD having released a small number of articles displaying liberal islamophobia. Because liberal islamophobia is difficult to identify, the pushback is as well.

**Figure 11: Frequencies of Articles pushing back against Illiberal and Liberal Islamophobia**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Displays frequencies of articles coded '1' (yes) for pushing back against illiberal or liberal islamophobia. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 11 for pushing back against liberal islamophobia SvD, N = 19 for pushing back against liberal islamophobia AB. N = 114 for pushing back against illiberal islamophobia SvD, N = 127 for pushing back against illiberal islamophobia AB.*

What it can look like is an example of an editorial article published by SvD in 2017. Here the author, Ivar Arpi, talks about a situation in which Muslim and Swedish values collide:

*“All beliefs must be treated equally by the state and the law.*

*- For example, a young Muslim man refuses to shake hands with a female manager, does not get the job, but is awarded damages. Compare this with a young Pentecostal friend who refuses to shake hands with homosexuals and doesn't get the job. He receives no compensation. The Pentecostal friend would be sharply criticized, I think. But the examples are fully comparable. Both justify their actions with their religious beliefs. The interesting thing is that we treat him who refuses to shake hands with homosexuals as our equal, but we pat the young Muslim on the head and say that he cannot live up to his faith and give him damages. It's incredibly demeaning, with a racist undertone”.*

In this case, the author publicly challenges subtle forms of discrimination against Muslims, saying they have a racist undertone, which in this case are the damages being paid out and the Muslim being treated differently.

An example of a public pushback against illiberal islamophobia can be found in an editorial article published by AB in 2023, where journalist Jona Sima condemns the islamophobia statements made by Swedish Democrat Richard Jomshof:

*“Jomshof's anti-Muslim statements have not only set the hook for Sweden's NATO application. They are gross, generalizing, and offensive descriptions of the religion that has around 1.6 billion practitioners”.*

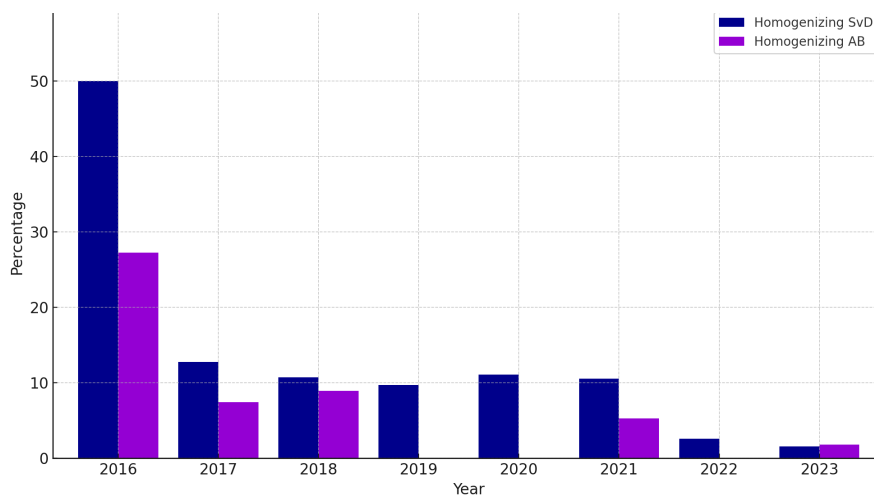
This is a positive example of the tabloid not accepting clearly Islamophobic statements and even explaining why they lead to disadvantages for Sweden in the political world. It displays the news media fulfilling their role as watchdog by explaining to the audience why certain issues are problematic and by clearly opposing them.

As established previously in this thesis, the media can significantly impact public perception by framing issues a certain way (Entman, 1989). Therefore, it is interesting to see how the media present Islam and whether the religion is framed as one big outgroup or not. A limitation of this variable is its low Cohen's Kappa, indicating a low reliability of the chosen variable. The data needs to be interpreted with caution. **Figure 12** depicts the frequencies of articles homogenizing Muslims as an outgroup in AB and SvD. This selected variable is representative of the symptom of early democratic erosion in which a certain group is singled

out and presented as a so-called ‘outgroup’ in the news media. If high frequencies of this phenomenon are happening, it can be indicative of early democratic erosion. A clear trend for the chosen variable is detectable for SvD, with the high frequency of 50% in 2016 dropping immensely until 2020, where roughly 10% of articles homogenize Muslims. Then, a small peak can be seen until 2021, after which the numbers drop again to an all-time low in 2023. AB does not display such a trend, starting with frequencies of almost 30%, then dropping a lot in 2017 to less than 10%, with a slow rise following in 2018. The following years show none to very low frequencies, with 2023 ending in less than 5%. However, the differences between SvD and AB are apparent. While both outlets see a decrease in the frequency of articles presenting Muslims as an outgroup, SvD shows a persistently higher percentage of doing so than AB. Those differences between outlets could be explained by varying editorial policies or responses to public sentiments that regard Islam. Compared to AB, the changing frequencies in SvD’s articles display a more reactive adjustment to either changing societal norms or criticism. However, the low frequencies in 2023 for both outlets display a decrease in homogenizing, which in turn implies a shift towards a more inclusive news media representation.

During the analysis, no indications of using propaganda or misinformation to manipulate the public were found.

**Figure 12: Frequencies of Articles homogenizing Muslims**



*Note. Chart based on data extracted during the coding phase of the quantitative content analysis. Frequencies depicted in percentage. N = 332 for SvD, N = 355 for AB.*

## 8. Discussion

In this chapter, the implications of the previously presented variables and subsequent results are discussed by comparing them with existing political context and referring back to scholarly literature. The results show that the two news outlets display certain symptoms of democratic erosion and that they vary between being actors and arenas.

The domination of Islamism as a main topic is very apparent in both outlets up until 2022 when looking at the results of the quantitative analysis. As (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021) find, the news media can play a crucial role in normalizing extremist language and, therefore, political intolerance. So, in line with the work of (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021), this focus on Islamism can be considered problematic as disproportionately high numbers of articles talking about religious extremism have the potential to sow mistrust towards the concerned religion, in this case, Islam. That is why the variable, regarding the news media outlets highlighting distinctions between Islamism and Islam, provides valuable insight into whether the news media act as an educator and forum for discussion or if they are normalizing political intolerance. Both SvD and AB have shown a varied commitment to distinguishing between Islam and Islamism throughout the years. Until 2022, SvD has displayed a consistently higher frequency of distinguishing between Islam and Islamism, showing that the broadsheet is fulfilling its role of informing the public correctly better than the tabloid up until 2022. By openly discussing differences between the main religion of Islam and extremist strands of it, the news media contribute to the political education of the audience. The results also show that tabloids, such as AB, are more drawn toward sensationalism rather than factful information most of the time. News media outlets that fail to clearly differentiate between the two could unintentionally contribute to democratic erosion by fostering Islamophobic environments that oppose democratic values. Furthermore, not differentiating between the two terms conduces to the normalization of political intolerance, which is another symptom of early democratic erosion. As both outlets have not been fully committed to making these distinctions and never reach a 100% frequency, they fail their normative role as informants of the public in this case and contribute to the normalization of political intolerance. Therefore, they are displaying symptoms of early democratic erosion.

But in 2023, the main topic of Islamism is less present, instead being replaced by higher frequencies of articles talking about the freedom of speech. A look into recent Swedish history shows that the discussion around freedom of speech started rising around the same year when different individuals began burning Qurans, igniting violent protests around

Sweden. Additionally, politicians belonging to the Swedish Democrats published Islamophobic tweets, insulting the religion of Islam. Suddenly, the main concern for politicians became the question of what actions are allowed in the name of freedom of speech and which ones cross the line. The increased reporting on these incidents suggests a reactive pattern in news media coverage, a potential reaction to perceived threats against a liberal democratic value. This reactivity to what political actors consider important is representative of the news media being a microphone for issues of the elite rather than being an active part of choosing issue salience. While this is not directly a symptom of democratic erosion, it's problematic as it can undermine pluralism and marginalize alternative voices (Karppinen, 2013). This can contribute to democratic erosion in the long run. It also shows that the subject of freedom of speech moved from the sphere of consensus, according to Hallin's (1986) model, to the sphere of legitimate controversy. While the subject enjoyed overall consensus previously, its components and limitations are now being discussed frequently. The qualitative reading showed that this move was not initiated by the media but rather by political actors as the discussion is mostly based on statements from politicians and not news articles, again highlighting the arena function of the media in this case.

While the last coded main topic 'denial of freedom of religion towards Muslims', characterized by violent actions such as the burning of Swedish Mosques or discriminating policies like the denial of building mosques, has not been as prevalent of a main topic as others, the frequency of covering the pushback against such actions has been high on average in both SvD and AB's published articles. This counteracts the normalization of anti-democratic ideas that have entered the public sphere at this point. The coverage of the Mosque burnings or policies forbidding the building of mosques but also the following backlash suggest that the news media question current issues and present different perspectives, showing the audience that some people criticize Islam (by burning the Mosques) and that others stand up for the religion (by protesting against the burnings). Such a presentation of various viewpoints speaks for the news media fulfilling their normative role of informing the public on current issues (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Furthermore, the news media contribute to protecting civil liberties, in this case the freedom of religion, which is crucial in a healthy democracy as (Gorokhovskaia, 2024) states. According to her recent research, the decay of civil liberties is indicative of democratic decline. By pushing back against policies that restrict Muslims from practicing their faith, the news media counteract democratic erosion in the public sphere as they stand up for democratic rights and are therefore not merely an arena.

Also implying a counteraction of democratic erosion are the quantitative results of how the news media portray Islam. The portrayals of Islam experienced an overall shift from averagely higher frequencies of negative portrayals to more positive ones before displaying low frequencies of both positive and negative portrayals in 2023 in both SvD and AB. These results imply an increasingly neutral presentation of Islam, which is indicative of social cohesion as a specific group is not singled out and presented in a certain light. Neutrality, in this case, can be interpreted as the acceptance of Islam as a religion and allows the news media to foster a healthy debate free of bias, therefore fulfilling its normative role as an informant and a forum for discussion. Therefore, the low frequencies of both positive and negative portrayals of the world religion Islam measured in 2023 can be interpreted as a positive development towards counteracting democratic erosion. This is supported by the overall decline recorded in both SvD and AB since 2017 when it comes to juxtaposing Islam and violence. This decline is a positive development in regard to democratic erosion as it implies that both outlets have not been presenting Islam in a negative context which contributes to the reduction of social tensions between different groups and promotes equality of different religions. It implies that democratic pluralism is promoted by mitigating stereotyping and potential prejudice. Additionally, the decreasing trend of articles homogenizing Muslims is representative of counteracting democratic erosion as it embraces the democratic value of equality, shows respectful discourse towards minorities or other religions, and is, therefore, a great example of the Swedish news media's potential to counter democratic erosion.

However, the rising frequencies of illiberal Islamophobia paint a different picture. When analyzing the frequencies of articles displaying illiberal islamophobia, an all-time high for illiberal Islamophobia can be detected in 2023 for both SvD and AB. This suggests polarizing characteristics and recently increased news media attention to that subject. Having the latest Swedish political history in mind, the recent rise of illiberal Islamophobia in the news media coincides with the Swedish Democrats gaining votes and popularity amongst the Swedish population (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). This observation is consistent with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2019) proposed theories on how changes in political power can affect public discourse and possibly contribute to democracy declining through altered news media behavior. Yet, the frequent pushback against illiberal islamophobia in both outlets is evidence of the news media not accepting extremist views. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) state, an important role of influential institutions in a democracy is the countering of the normalization of extremist ideologies. While the authors referred to political institutions in their work, this statement can be extended to the news media as well because of their important role in a democracy, as established previously in this thesis. When the news media challenge such

Islamophobia, they fulfill a gatekeeping role that helps foster more inclusive and respectful discourse.

But, what becomes clear in the qualitative presentation of the analysis is that the Swedish media provide a platform for anti-democratic ideas, even if there is pushback against it. An example of this is the articles that talk about the Islamophobic statements by the Swedish Democrat Richard Jomshof. Both news media outlets cited him and, with that, made his personal, anti-democratic thoughts visible when instead, the news media could have merely mentioned that he made inappropriate comments and then presented opposing views. Giving such a stage to these thoughts can contribute to the normalization of anti-democratic ideas in the public sphere and also regularize up-front intolerance. Relating back to Hallin's (1986) model, by covering and quoting such statements, the topic of islamophobia moves from the sphere of deviance, in which it is totally unacceptable and opposed, to the sphere of legitimate controversy. Here, islamophobia and anti-democratic statements are worthy of discussion instead of being unequivocally dismissed. But, due to the rather high pushback in both outlets, it becomes clear that this change of normalizing such discourse is driven by shifting political powers and not by the media alone. The media are, to some extent, pushing back, which shows that they are not just an arena but actors when it comes to this subject. However, the pushback needs to be increased even more, and the statements should receive less media coverage if democratic erosion is to be counteracted.

But what about less upfront and more concealed Islamophobia? Both liberal islamophobia and the identified pushback against it have been quite inconsistent over the years in both SvD and AB articles. Out of the six years in which liberal islamophobia was detected, only two years (2016, 2020) displayed a full pushback against liberal islamophobia in both outlets. This suggests a lack of attention from the news media to the matter, which is problematic in regard to the early symptoms of democratic erosion. It can contribute to democratic erosion because the news media fail to challenge subtle biases that can influence the overall atmosphere towards Islam in the public sphere. Even if the frequencies of liberal islamophobia are low, it is still crucial the news media push back against them to prevent the slow degradation of democratic values. In this case, both outlets do not fulfill their normative role of watchdog, and instead of being an independent actor, they are merely an arena.

So, as the results show, Sweden's news media display all symptoms of democratic erosion except for the use of propaganda or misinformation to manipulate the public, which has not been discovered during the qualitative analysis. However, the patterns over the year point

towards a positive news media development in which the news media are not just an arena but also actors who, at least partially, oppose anti-democratic views and contribute to the factual informing of the public. Particularly affirmative highlights are the increasing differentiations between Islam and Islamism made by the news media and the high pushback against illiberal Islamophobia. Those results demonstrate how the news media can counteract democratic erosion by fulfilling their normative roles, such as informing the public and not accepting political intolerance. Especially tabloids, which the results show might be more drawn to sensationalism, need to take greater care in their practices to provide correct information to support democratic ideals. Furthermore, the results highlight again how important it is "(...) that the news media provide a forum for political discussions and factually correct and comprehensive news journalism" (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 341).

## 8.1. Current Limitations and Future Research

Even though this research provides an interesting first insight into what symptoms of early democratic erosion in the news media look like and what role the news media can play, there are some limitations that need to be regarded. Firstly, it must be kept in mind that there is barely any other research on the role of the news media during democratic erosion or potential symptoms. So, all symptoms and other conclusions are based on deductive thought, and the functions described in this thesis might be easily theorized but a lot blurrier in reality. While the role of the news media or variables such as liberal islamophobia are easily theorized, the reality of it does not provide as clear of a picture. As there is not much research to compare the thoughts and findings of this thesis with, it must be considered exploratory. Also, while the theory is kept very general and the identified symptoms can be applied to other cases, only one aspect (Freedom of Religion) has been empirically assessed. The results may differ when including more and different aspects, and symptoms can vary depending on the case. This connects to the next limitation, which is the focus on one country (Sweden) in a certain time period. A change in country and years may change the detected results. Also, this thesis focused on traditional news media as representative of the public sphere in Sweden. However, social, or alternative news media are just as important to regard because they can play an important role in either counteracting or contributing to democratic erosion. Especially the phenomenon of echo chambers, which reflect an individual's own views instead of confronting different perspectives, can reinforce anti-democratic ideas and lead to fragmentation in society.

This highlights the need for more future research on the subject. For example, future research could assess a variety of different news media types and take in visual or acoustic elements as well to receive a more holistic understanding of the news media's role and what symptoms of early democratic erosion could be like in a different element. Including different countries, expanding the time period, and analyzing more components can provide even more valuable insights into democratic erosion from a communications perspective. As this thesis was conducted in an exploratory manner, the analysis was kept quite narrow with two outlets, and broader research comparing a higher number of news media outlets is recommended.

## 9. Conclusion

This thesis aims to identify what symptoms of early democratic erosion look like and what role the news media play in that process. Through deductive reading of literature on democratic erosion and the normative roles of the news media in a healthy democracy, the thesis determined potential drivers of early democratic erosion as jeopardizing civil liberties, especially those of minorities or a particular group. Potential symptoms of early democratic erosion in the news media were determined as the normalization of hostile discourse, the provision of a platform for anti-democratic ideas, the normalization of political intolerance, the targeting of one group in the news media and the use of propaganda or misinformation to manipulate the public.. While the news media are not solely responsible for democratic erosion, they can counteract or contribute. The news media contribute to the phenomenon by failing their normative roles in a democracy and undermining democratic values. This can have different dimensions, such as publishing anti-democratic discourse without challenging it or the polarized presentation of political issues or minorities without providing alternative perspectives. Complicity of the news media, characterized by simply echoing statements from political actors, is part of this failure and subsequently contributes to democratic erosion. However, the news media also can counteract democratic erosion by resisting such polarization, publishing fact-checked information, and challenging anti-democratic statements made by political actors. Suppose the news media fulfill their normative roles dutifully. In that case, they can create an environment where healthy discussion flourishes and minority voices are included equally, without hate speech and intolerant discourse dominating the public sphere. These outcomes can be generalized theoretically to other countries with a free press and fulfill the requirements of a liberal democracy. The symptoms are generally applicable when analyzing democratic erosion in regard to civil liberties.

A case study of Sweden focused on freedom of religion was conducted to find out what these theorized symptoms and roles can look like in reality. Sweden is a liberal democracy and has not deteriorated into an electoral democracy. However, when analyzing the results, it becomes clear that the Swedish news media displayed early symptoms of democratic erosion. This is particularly obvious in the way Islam and Islamism are often connected, as such a consolidation can normalize political intolerance and facilitate an Islamophobic environment. Also, the rise of illiberal islamophobia in the news media is an indicator of such symptoms as it signifies the normalization of hostile discourse and the targeting of an outgroup, in this case, Muslims. SvD has been more committed to providing factual information compared to AB. This is visible in the higher frequencies of differentiating between Islam and Islamism.

Nonetheless, a pattern of positive developments by the news media can be observed, such as the high pushback against illiberal islamophobia and the rising distinctions between Islam and Islamism, also in AB, over the recorded period. It indicates a positive prognosis that the Swedish news media are on a good way to counteract democratic erosion, despite displaying the identified symptoms. This enables a provision of recommendations for the Swedish news media on what can be done and should be continued to further counteract democratic erosion. Firstly, an improved distinction between Islam and Islamism should be provided for the news media to fulfill their normative role as educators for the public even better. Also, Islamophobic statements have to be continuously opposed, which provides less of a stage for anti-democratic ideas and enables the news media to act as a watchdog. Promoting more inclusive dialogue is also recommended, with the news media acting as a healthy forum for discussion. The Swedish news media have the potential to play an essential role in safeguarding Swedish democracy by adhering to these recommendations, which can be generalized to the news media in other similar countries. This thesis, therefore, highlights the importance of the news media adhering to their normative roles to safeguard and protect democracy in these critical times of worldwide democratic decline.

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## 11. Appendix I: Reliability Tests

**Table 4: Holsti's Method Formula\* Results**

Variable	Percentage Agreement (%)
Main Topic Freedom of Speech ( <i>speech_free</i> )	97.06
Main Topic Islamism ( <i>Islamism</i> )	94.12
Distinction between Islam and Islamism ( <i>distinction</i> )	97.06
Juxtaposing Islam and Violence ( <i>islam_viol</i> )	94.12
Main Topic Denial of Freedom of Religion for Muslims ( <i>denial</i> )	100.00
Pushback against Denial of Freedom of Religion for Muslims ( <i>push_denial</i> )	100.00
Liberal Islamophobia ( <i>liberal</i> )	91.18
Pushback against Liberal Islamophobia ( <i>push_lib</i> )	94.12
Illiberal Islamophobia ( <i>illiberal</i> )	94.12
Pushback against Illiberal Islamophobia ( <i>push_illib</i> )	94.12
Positive Depiction of Islam ( <i>positive</i> )	97.06
Negative Depiction of Islam ( <i>negative</i> )	100
Homogenizing Muslims as an Outgroup ( <i>outgroup</i> )	96.97

*Note. Table presents the Holsti's Method Formula results for each variable of the quantitative content analysis. The numbers are presented in percentage agreement. The variable name used in stata is presented in brackets. Refer to the codebook for further information on the respective variables.*

*\*The Holsti's Method Formula calculates coder reliability and ranges from 0 – 1, depicted in percentage in the table.*

**Table 5: Cohens Kappa**

Variable	Expected Agreement (%)	Actual Agreement (%)	Cohens Kappa*
Main Topic Freedom of Speech ( <i>speech_free</i> )	69.07	97.06	0.905
Main Topic Islamism ( <i>Islamism</i> )	64.10	94.12	0.837
Distinction between Islam and Islamism ( <i>distinction</i> )	63.28	97.06	0.920
Juxtaposing Islam and Violence ( <i>islam_viol</i> )	83.91	94.12	0.638
Main Topic Denial of Freedom of Religion for Muslims ( <i>denial</i> )	88.93	100.00	1.000
Pushback against Denial of Freedom of Religion for Muslims ( <i>push_denial</i> )	88.75	100.00	1.000
Liberal Islamophobia ( <i>liberal</i> )	86.38	91.18	0.354
Pushback against Liberal Islamophobia ( <i>push_lib</i> )	83.91	94.12	0.634
Illiberal Islamophobia ( <i>illiberal</i> )	58.48	94.12	0.859
Pushback against Illiberal Islamophobia ( <i>push_illib</i> )	54.84	94.12	0.870
Positive Depiction of Islam ( <i>positive</i> )	91.57	97.06	0.653
Negative Depiction of Islam ( <i>negative</i> )	88.93	100.00	1.000
Homogenizing Muslims as an Outgroup ( <i>outgroup</i> )	96.97	96.97	0.000

Note. The table presents Cohens Kappa for each variable of the quantitative content analysis. The variable name used in Stata is presented in brackets. The expected and actual agreement are presented in percent. Refer to the codebook for further information on the respective variables.

\*Cohens Kappa measures reliability for categorical items and ranges from -1 to +1.

# 12. Appendix II: Codebook

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## A. Outline

### 1. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to quantitatively examine if symptoms of early democratic erosion are present in the Swedish news media over the course of 7 years. To make the empirical research more accessible, it will focus on freedom of religion as a human right and assess how religions not native to Europe, namely the world religion of Islam, are represented in the news media and if those presentations are symptoms of early democratic erosion. The decision to focus on freedom of religion is grounded in the fact that “[t]he issue of religious freedom has become the subject of escalating conflict in the Swedish news media and related public debate – as part of political disputes over migration” (Demker, 2023, p. 110).

The following codebook is only applicable when analyzing Sweden as a Swedish database (News media Arkivet Retriever) was used.

### 2. Sampling Units

For the chosen country, one broadsheet and one tabloid are analyzed.

In this case, Svenska Dagbladet (broadsheet) and Aftonbladet (tabloid) were chosen.

### 3. Units of Analysis

Units of analysis are domestically relevant news items that are posted on the respective websites of the selected outlets.

### 4. Definition of a news item

A news item is an article on the website of a broadsheet or tabloid.

Generally, the coding instructions are the same for both the broadsheet and the tabloid.

- The individual online news item has to consist of text (pictures or videos are acknowledged but not distinctively coded. The focus is on the text, separate from whether visual elements accompany the text).
- New or sub-headlines within the text of an article do not constitute a new article.

#### Do not code:

- Articles with less than five lines of text.
- Articles that are news in motor, fashion, sports, science, travel, and culture sections.
- ‘side stories’ embedded within the body of a larger online article (on the right/left side, center or bottom top, sometimes in another frame) which have their own headlines and story.

## 5. Sampling

The sampling period for Sweden is from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023 (7 years).

The sample collection was conducted during April 2024.

Using the Scandinavian news media archive 'Retriever', the following filters are to be applied in the subsequent order:

1. Search words 'Islam' OR 'Muslim'  
(*Sök i arkivet: islam eller muslim*)
2. Time period  
(*Tidsperiod*)
3. Language: Swedish  
(*Språk: Svenska*)
4. News media channel: Web  
(*Mediekanal: Webb*)
5. Web: select outlet  
(*in this case: Aftonbladet / Svenska Dagsbladet, Svenska Dagsbladet Premium*)
6. Subject: Politics, Crime and Justice, Social Relations, Religion and Belief  
(*Ämne: Politik, Brotts och Rättväsende, Sociala Förhållanden, Religion och Tro*)
7. Place: Sweden, Stockholm, Gothenburg  
(*Platser: Sverige, Stockholm, Göteborg*)
8. Year  
(*år*)

- In the first round, the focus is on the tabloid.  
All of the filters are selected as stated above, and each year will be assessed individually. This means that for the time period of 7 years chosen in the thesis, seven different searches are conducted, one for each year.  
The suggested pre-filtered articles are then filtered manually following the rules in Chapter 4.
- In the second round, the focus is on the broadsheet.  
All of the filters are selected as stated above, and each year will be assessed individually. This means that for the time period of 7 years chosen in the thesis, seven different searches are conducted, one for each year.

The suggested pre-filtered articles are then filtered manually following the rules in Chapter 4.

## 6. Selection Criteria

Using the news media archive 'Retriever', the articles are pre-filtered following the instructions provided in chapter 5. Of those pre-selected articles, those fulfilling the following criteria are coded:

### Code:

- Articles that are columns by Swedish journalists.
- Articles that are opinion pieces by Swedish political actors or Swedish journalists.
- Articles that directly concern Sweden either internationally, nationally, or locally.
- Articles that contain a timeline additionally to their flow-text. Extra info after the main article is also to be included.

### Do not code:

- Articles which are a review of a book, movie, or other object.
- Articles that are opinion pieces by people who are non-political actors (individuals who do not possess a legal working position in the Swedish government) and non-journalists.
- Articles that are a timeline of a certain subject without flow-text.
- Articles that do not concern Sweden on a national or international level.

## 7. Advice for Coding

If anything seems unclear, please contact the author of the thesis for further information.

## 8. Study Overview

- **Sampling units:** 1 tabloid, 1 broadsheet

- **Sampling period:** 1st January 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023 (7 years)

- **Selection Criteria:** news items or opinion pieces by Swedish journalists or political actors which contain the words 'Islam' or 'Muslim' at least once; are released by Aftonbladet or Svenska Dagbladet; fall under the categories of politics, crime and justice, social relations or religion and belief; and concern Sweden on a national or international level

- **Sampling:** The sample was collected in April 2024

- **Formal Categories:**
  1. Coder
  2. Story Identification Number
  3. Date
  4. Type of Medium

- **Symptoms of democratic erosion:**
  5. Is the article published by a broadsheet or tabloid?
  6. Is the article a news article?
  7. Is the article an opinion piece?
  8. Is the article an editorial article?
  9. Is the article a news commentary?
  10. Is the main topic of the article freedom of speech?
  11. Is the main topic of the article Islamism?
  12. Is the article making a distinction between Islam and Islamism?
  13. Does the article juxtapose Islam and violence?
  14. Is the main topic of the article about the denial of freedom of religion to Muslims?
  15. If yes, is there any pushback against the denial of freedom in the article?
  16. Is the article displaying liberal islamophobia?
  17. If yes, is there any pushback against liberal islamophobia in the article?
  18. Is the article displaying illiberal islamophobia?
  19. If yes, is there any pushback against illiberal islamophobia in the article?
  20. Is the article portraying the religion of Islam positively?
  21. Is the article portraying the religion of Islam negatively?
  22. Is the article homogenizing Muslims as an outgroup?

## B. Formal Categories

### 1. Coder

1 Svenja Hix

### 2. Story Identification Number

Running number, assign a number in ascending order to each article you code (1, 2, 3, ... 416, 417, 418, etc.).

Note: Do not start back at 1 when coding the second outlet, but continue to assign numbers in ascending order across outlets you code. This way, every item receives an individual identification number.

Instruction for coder: Before you start coding articles, write down the individual identification number and make sure to also do that for the last article that is coded so you know with which number to start again the following time you code.

### 3. Date

Insert the date of the article. Format: YYYY

### 4. Type of Medium

Type of medium a news item appears in.

1 Broadsheet

2 Tabloid

## C. Symptoms of Democratic Erosion

5. Is the article published by a broadsheet or a tabloid?

The question is to be coded with 1 = broadsheet or 2 = tabloid.

It is to be answered with 1 if the article is published by a broadsheet.

It is to be answered with 2 if the article is published by a tabloid.

6. Is the article a news article?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article reports facts without the opinion of a reporter, writer, producer, presenter, or other actor. Attributed or quoted opinions of people interviewed can be mentioned but the opinion of the newsgatherer or news organization is not included.

Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

7. Is the article an opinion piece?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article is published by an actor that external to the newspaper, is labelled as "Debate" and published on debate pages.

Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

8. Is the article an editorial article?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article is published on the editorial pages of the newspaper and gives the perspective of either the newspaper as such (unsigned editorials) or of an editorial writer (signed editorials). Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

9. Is the article a news commentary?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article has a label that explicitly signals that the article represents a news analysis by a news journalist that includes interpretations.

Examples are labels such as "Analysis", "Comment", or "Perspective". Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

*Please note that an article can only be either a news article, opinion piece, editorial article, OR news commentary. It cannot be two of these things at the same time. If one of the 4 options is coded with 1 for yes, it automatically sets the other three to 2.*

10. Is the main topic of the article freedom of speech?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the main subject of the article is concerned with the freedom of speech.

Examples for this can be incidents or issues surrounding the question of which actions are allowed in the name of freedom of speech and which actions cross the line set by either policies or norms in a country. Further examples are actors defending or justifying their actions by referring to freedom of speech and their right to exercise it. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

11. Is the main topic of the article Islamism?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the main subject of the article revolves around Islamism, a current in Islam which believes that Islam should guide both political as well as personal life. Islamism can have different sub-groupings such as Salafism.

Examples for the main topic being Islamism can be the coverage of terror attacks conducted in the name of Islam, focusing on jihadists committing acts of crime or talking about organizations such as the Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaida. This includes descriptions of the IS califate in Syria, information on the operation of the IS or personal stories of individuals who have been connected to the group, either currently or previously. Such connections can be the active participation of an individual in terror attacks in the name of Islam, the travelling to one of the locations of the IS or the public sympathizing of an individual with the IS. It can also be the main focus on very strict rules which limit the freedom of women, such as them having to dress without showing skin or wearing perfume. Discussions about Islamism by political actors are to be coded as 1 as well. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

12. Is the article making a distinction between Islam and Islamism?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no or 99 = not applicable.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article mentions a distinction between the world religion of Islam and Islamism, the belief that Islam should guide both political as well as personal life. Islamism can have different sub-groupings such as Salafism.

The distinction between Islam and Islamism can be comments on how Islamism is a sector of Islam and does not represent the broad majority of Muslims or citations which emphasize that their criticism is directed at Islamism and not Islam. Also comments on how the world religion of Islam does not share the same beliefs as Islamism or any of its sub-groupings are to be coded with 1.

It is to be coded with 2 if the article does not make such a distinction.

This variable is to be coded with 99 if the previous variable number 11 is coded with 2.

### 13. Does the article juxtapose Islam and violence?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article deals with Islam or Muslims in the context of politically or religiously motivated violence. Politically and religiously motivated violence refers to violence, such as attacks and riots, that are motivated by a desire to enforce Islam or protest against perceived injustices against Islam. If this juxtaposing does not happen, it is to be coded with 2.

### 14. Is the main topic of the article about the denial of freedom of religion to Muslims?

It is to be coded with 1 if the main subject of the article revolves around hostile behavior towards Muslims which denies them freedom of religion.

Examples for the main topic being the denial freedom of religion to Muslims can be verbal or physical attacks on Mosques or other Muslim establishments, policies which limit Muslims in exercising their religion (such as the wearing of Hijabs or other religious clothing) or calls for Muslims to not practice their religion in public but rather keep it private. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

### 15. IF yes, is there any pushback against the denial of freedom of religion in the article?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes, 2 = no, or 99 = not applicable.

It is to be coded with 99 if the main topic of the article is not the denial of freedom of religion to Muslims. It is to be coded with 1 if the article includes any quote or statement that argues against or pushes back against denying Muslims freedom of religion. These quotes or statements may come from external news sources or from the journalist writing the article. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

16. Is the article displaying liberal islamophobia?

The question is to be answered with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article recognises Muslims who adhere to Western ideals and/or focusses on the differences of values or culture between religions such as Christianity and Islam.

Liberal Islamophobia is based on a defense of the rule of laws and distances itself from the roots of traditional racism and hate, focusing on the differences in culture, values and religion instead (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 12). It recognises 'good' Muslims as those who adhere to Western ideals. Examples for such can be stories of Muslims who practice a more liberal type of Islam in line with Western ideals. It can also be stories of Muslims who distance themselves from the conventional type of Islam and condemn it. Furthermore, stories on the differences of Muslim culture, values or religious practices compared to Christianity and the Western world are mentioned in the article. An example phrase for liberal islamophobia is "Amina, who is a secular Muslim, chose to take off her hijab when she moved to Sweden". Here, the focus of the sentence is on a girl who is a Muslim but chooses to follow Western ideals by not covering her hair, thereby displaying liberal islamophobia.

It is to be coded with 2 if these aspects are not mentioned in the article.

17. IF yes, is there any pushback against liberal islamophobia in the article?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes, 2 = no, or 99 = not applicable.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article includes any quote or statement that argues against or pushes back against liberal islamophobia. These quotes or statements may come from external news sources or from the journalist writing the article. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

This variable is to be coded with 99 if the previous variable number 16 is coded with 2.

18. Is the article displaying illiberal islamophobia?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article contains discursive attacks against Muslims, appeals for repatriation or genocide and discriminating language against the religion of Islam.

Illiberal Islamophobia is close to traditional racism and presents a monolithic view which includes all Muslims. Open attacks against Muslims, both in discursive and physical form, as well as appeals for repatriation, and sometimes even genocide, are distinctive of illiberal Islamophobia (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 9). Examples of this in an article are comments or citations by other actors which openly discriminate or insult Islam and/or Muslims or depict Muslims as if they constitute a homogenous group. Furthermore, no distinctions between different strands of Islam are made and

the religion is presented as one big community without internal diversity. An example for illiberal islamophobia is the phrase “All Muslims are abominable”. The phrase homogenizes all Muslims and insults them on a broad level, thereby displaying illiberal islamophobia. An action displaying illiberal islamophobia can (amongst others) be the burning of the Quran, which openly attacks those believing in it, or physical attacks towards individuals based on their belief.

It is to be coded with 2 if these aspects are not mentioned in the article.

19. IF yes, is there any pushback against illiberal islamophobia in the article?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes, 2 = no, or 99 = not applicable.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article includes any quote or statement that argues against or pushes back against illiberal islamophobia. These quotes or statements may come from external news sources or from the journalist writing the article. The article is also to be coded with 1 if it covers protests or other actions against illiberal Islamophobic actions. Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2.

This variable is to be coded with 99 if the previous variable number 18 is coded with 2.

20. Is the article portraying the religion of Islam positively?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article mentions advantages or positive consequences of being a Muslim and cites comments which praise the religion of Islam or mention positive attributes of it. An example for this can be a comment which depicts the good nature of Islam or citations in which the values of Islam are described positively. An exemplary sentence is: “Muslims enhance our country” because in this instance, Muslims are seen as a positive addition to another culture.

It is to be coded with 2 if the article does not present these aspects.

21. Is the article portraying the world religion of Islam negatively?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with negative if the article mentions restrictions and disadvantages of being a Muslim and cites comments which describe the religion of Islam negatively. Examples for that can be comments on Islam having a restrictive nature, hurting human and women’s rights, not being compatible with the Western way of living, or use Islam and Islamism synonymously. The difference between illiberal islamophobia and portraying the religion of Islam negatively is based on the line of argumentation. While illiberal islamophobia openly attacks or insults the world religion of Islam, a

negative portrayal is characterized by argumentations on why Islam is bad. An example for illiberal islamophobia is the phrase “All Muslims are abominable” versus an example for portraying the religion of Islam is the sentence “Islam restricts the freedom of women by forcing them to cover up”.

It is to be coded with 2 if the article does not present these aspects.

## 22. Is the article homogenizing Muslims as an out-group?

The question is to be coded with 1 = yes or 2 = no.

It is to be coded with 1 if the article refers to Muslims as one separated group with no attention to diversity within the Muslim community.

Examples for this could be the article or an actor cited in the article distinguishing between Muslims and a majority population, such as the Swedish public or Christians. Furthermore, the overlooking of diversity within Muslim communities and the treatment of them as a monolithic group is an example. An exemplary sentence could be “Integrating Muslims into the Swedish society brings different challenges with it”. In this sentence, a differentiation between Muslims and a Western society is being made and no distinction between different strands of Islam is being made.

Otherwise, it is to be coded with 2. Examples for not homogenizing Muslims as an out-group can be the entire lack of the subject in the article, or, if the topic of Islam and Muslims is present, the referral to the different directions within Islam (such as Sunni or Shia) and highlighting that Islam is not just one big religion but has lots of differences within.