

Content Moderation and Fact-Checking

Skrifter utgivna av Inst. för ABM vid Uppsala universitet. Volume 8.

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Content Moderation and Fact-Checking

A Study of Journalists' Information Practices in the
Contemporary News Media Landscape

Amalia Juneström



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Skrifter utgivna av Inst. för ABM vid Uppsala universitet. Volume 8.

Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Humanistiska Teatern, Thunbergsvägen 3H, Uppsala, Friday, 27 May 2022 at 10:15 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The examination will be conducted in Swedish. Faculty examiner: Universitetslektor Hanna Carlsson (Linnéuniversitetet).

Abstract

Juneström, A. 2022. Content Moderation and Fact-Checking. A Study of Journalists' Information Practices in the Contemporary News Media Landscape. *Skrifter utgivna vid institutionen för ABM vid Uppsala universitet* 8. 129 pp. Uppsala: Uppsala University. ISBN 978-91-506-2944-6.

This thesis in information studies is about journalists' and news media professionals' engagement in two specific information practices that have become integrated into contemporary journalism. Two of the four articles included in this thesis focus on content moderation and two on fact-checking. All four articles were written within the framework of information studies.

The two practices—content moderation of online news media comments sections and fact-checking—have emerged within the evolving information landscape of digital journalism. The aim of this thesis is to explore how these practices are constructed through journalists' and news media professionals' conceptualization of misbehaving users online and the spreading of misinformation.

The thesis focuses on content moderation and fact-checking as responses to how journalists experience the perceived problems of online misconduct and misinformation. By combining the five concepts *information landscape*, *information practice*, *discourse*, *information infrastructure*, and *genre*, this thesis advances our understanding of the processes through which new information practices and genres emerge and take shape within the specific news media environment of the contemporary information age.

This research found that content moderation and contemporary fact-checking are thoroughly intertwined with journalists' notions of what their professional mission is. While the same motives were cited in legitimizing completely opposing actions, the same actions were often justified by citing very different principles. These conflicting ideals and motives were found to underpin the practices regardless of the national affiliation of the studied actors. There were no indications that the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of misinformation were understood or discussed differently in the various geographical locations where the studied practices of content moderation and fact-checking occur.

This thesis ascertained that the practitioners draw on the moral values, traditions, and ideas of what it means to be a journalist when legitimizing content moderation and fact-checking. Furthermore, it found an ongoing struggle between the conflicting ideals and motives that underpin these practices.

Keywords: information practices; information landscape; information infrastructure; genre; discourses; content moderation; fact-checking; digital journalism

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ISSN 1652-5353

ISBN 978-91-506-2944-6

URN urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-471068 (<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-471068>)

To my family

List of papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I. Juneström, A. (2019). Emerging practices for managing user misconduct in online news media comments sections. *Journal of Documentation*, 75(4), 694–708.
- II. Juneström, A. (2019). Online user misconduct and an evolving infrastructure of practices: A practice-based study of information infrastructure and social practices. *Information Research*, 24(1), <http://informationr.net/ir/24-1/isic2018/isic1825.html>.
- III. Juneström, A. (2020). An emerging genre of contemporary fact-checking, *Journal of Documentation*, 77(2), 501–517.
- IV. Juneström, A. (2022). Discourses of fact-checking in Swedish news media. *Journal of Documentation*, 78(7), 125–140.

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Abbreviations

ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
DN	Dagens Nyheter
DR	Danmarks Radio
IFCN	The International Fact-Checking Network
SPON	Spiegel Online
SR	Sveriges Radio
SvD	Svenska Dagbladet
SVT	Sveriges Television
VOCM	Voice of the Common Man

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Acknowledgments

At my final seminar, or mock defense, my opponent Professor Elena Macevičiūtė from the University of Borås, asked me what had made me interested in the professional practices of journalists. The question is relevant. I am not a journalist, and I have no background in media studies. Why would I choose to engage with the topic of two practices that are so deeply embedded within journalism? To answer this question, I will need to wind the clock back to a time long before I began this research project.

In the autumn of 2002, I moved to Germany to study. I had planned to stay one semester, but it would be twelve years until I returned to Sweden. During my first year in Hamburg, I sometimes stopped by the café at the Swedish church down by the harbor to read the printed copies of Swedish newspapers there. I went there to read the news because doing so was aligned with my own news consumption practices at the time. The Internet connection at my student residence was slow, and I did not particularly like spending time in the communal space, the *Rechenzentrum*, provided by the university for students to use the Internet. More importantly, in 2002, I was still not used to reading news online. That would soon change though. I do not recall exactly when this change came about, but I do know that by the autumn of 2004 my news consumption routines and rituals had changed completely. Still living in Germany, I was an intern at a small publishing house. It was a slow job with little to do, and I used to fill my dead time by skimming through online newspapers. By that time, most newspapers that I read were German publications, and they were online. Although I did not reflect on it at the time, the way in which I was consuming news had changed. Facebook was founded in 2004. I joined in 2007, and started “poking” an increasing number of Facebook friends. At that time, I did not use Facebook to access news, but I soon would.

Gradually, while becoming aware of the impact that my new media habits were having on my own life, I became interested in finding out more about other people’s experiences of engaging with evolving news practices. In September 2016, I had that chance. I became a PhD student and began exploring two specific journalistic practices that have emerged within the evolving news media landscape.

Apart from thanking the above-mentioned opponent at my final seminar for her excellent feedback, I wish to thank my two supervisors at the Department

of ALM, Uppsala University, for their unfailing support and for the time they have invested in my project. First of all, I wish to express my sincerest gratitude toward my main supervisor, Professor Isto Huvila, for five and a half years of continual support and patient supervision. Likewise, I wish to thank my supervisor, Assistant Professor Ulrika Kjellman, whose encouragement, and valuable ideas have been important to my work. I am enormously grateful to both of them for reading and commenting on my many drafts and for always taking my ideas seriously. I also want to express my gratitude toward my external supervisor, Professor Jutta Haider, first at Lund University and later at the University of Borås, who has provided me with many valuable suggestions.

Life as a PhD candidate would not have been as rewarding as it has been had it not been for the wonderful community of people that I have been part of while working on my thesis. I am enormously grateful to all my colleagues at the Department of ALM for making my PhD years a truly inspiring and enjoyable time. I particularly wish to thank Görel Tunerlöv, without whose patient help with the many practical difficulties of the university maze I would have been lost. I wish to thank Anci Norlén for many valuable suggestions that have been important to my work and for showing me that teaching is fun and interesting. Also, many thanks to my PhD colleague Ina-Maria Jansson for sharing the office with me and for the great time we had together. Of course, I am also really grateful to everyone I met at countless seminars, conferences, and workshops. The suggestions that they gave me improved my work greatly. Special thanks go to my colleagues at Lund University for their feedback at our regular meetings.

I am also very grateful for having had the opportunity to explore other research environments. The autumn of 2017, which I spent as a guest researcher at the University of Western Ontario in Canada, was a great experience, and I wish to thank Professor Pamela McKenzie for her help in organizing my stay at FIMS. I also wish to thank Nicole Dalmer for her help in showing me around the university and the city of London, Ontario.

Although English is used on a daily basis within my academic environment, I would have been lost without the help I have had with proofreading many of my manuscripts. My sincerest thanks go to Elizabeth Dawson, who has patiently checked the language of this thesis and the many other texts that have been part and parcel of my PhD studies. Thanks also to the proofreader at Proper English for their language check of my kappa.

Special thanks also go to Gästrike-Hälsinge Nation for their generosity in awarding me the Göransson-Sandviken Fund research scholarship, which enabled me to continue and finish this thesis.

The past five and a half years have been a learning process that has involved adjusting to many new and unfamiliar practices, and I wish to take the opportunity to thank Katarina Bernhardsson for all her practical advice on what it means to be a PhD student. It has been a journey that has involved

many people, not just supervisors and colleagues. I am sincerely grateful to all the friends who have supported me, and I especially wish to thank my friends outside of the university for reminding me that there are other things in life apart from work. Special thanks go to Camilla Jönsson, Kerstin Hansson, and Anna Clara Benoni for being part of my life long before I ventured into this academic adventure and with whom I hope to share many Christmas dinners yet. Thanks also to Anna Wistbacka for many years of friendship that have, as friendships do, seeped into the lifeworld in which this thesis has come about.

My family has been crucial to making this journey worthwhile, and I want to thank my sister, Maria, with whom I share many interests and whose much-appreciated technical support has helped me on a number of occasions during different stages of this journey. More importantly, I wish to thank her for the many inspiring moments we have had together over the years. In addition, I am and will always be grateful to my nephew, Oscar, for the joy that he brings into my life and for his ability to make every undertaking, academic and otherwise, so much more colorful.

Finally, I wish to direct my sincerest and deepest thanks to my parents, Eva and Tommy, who have always volunteered to read the numerous texts that have followed in my wake during my time as a PhD student and the many years preceding it. Their unfailing belief in me, their encouragement, and their interest in everything that I do have supported me on this and many other journeys that I have undertaken inside and outside of the academia.

Uppsala, April 2022.

1. Introduction

The content moderation of news media comments sections and fact-checking are two undertakings that have become increasingly common in the contemporary news media landscape. Even though these information practices have received conspicuously little attention in the earlier information studies literature, their impact on people's information acquisition is indisputable.

Earlier research, for example, on nurses (Sundin, 2003), design researchers (Pilerot, 2014), and resuscitation practices (Lindh, 2015), has shown that all information practices are contextual. Although not exclusively performed by journalists, the content moderation of news media comments sections and fact-checking are emphatically tied to the context of the journalistic profession and to the contemporary news media landscape. This is a landscape that incorporates many different media contexts. One of them is digital journalism, which, simplified, can be defined as journalism "produced, distributed, and consumed with the aid of digital technologies" (Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Digital journalism is the context in which the two investigated practices occur. As it is in this context that journalists and news media professionals act on, respond to, and communicate information, this thesis conceptualizes digital journalism as an information landscape (Lloyd, 2006, 2010a, 2011), i.e., a landscape strongly defined by various information processes, for example, the communication and distribution of news. Understanding what journalists and news media professionals do, and how they feel and think about their practices is important as it yields insight into the information needs and means of communication found in a media landscape that has undergone drastic changes within a relatively short period.

Although this thesis is not specifically about the Internet, social media, or Facebook, these platforms are part of the study. They afford the space in which content moderation and fact-checking occur and connect with other practices, and are part of the landscape in which journalists engage in content moderation and fact-checking. These platforms are part of contemporary society and of the broader news media landscape including the information landscape of digital journalism in which content moderation and fact-checking occur. However, instead of focusing on the role of the Internet and social media in the moderation and fact-checking of online content, this thesis approaches the Internet and social media only as a backdrop to and means of enacting content moderation and fact-checking.

This thesis focuses on how journalists and other media professionals understand, practice, and communicate content moderation and fact-checking. Both these practices contain activities that involve dealing with information. Content moderators need to scan through and evaluate the user-generated information content of comments sections. How they respond to this content also involves the processing of information. If a user's post is deemed to transgress the news outlet's code of conduct, the outlet may decide to remove it. Likewise, fact-checking is also about administering information in specific ways. Once professional fact-checkers have decided what information to fact-check, they usually evaluate it by applying specific information evaluation methods approved by the organizations they work for and by organizations such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). After completing the fact-check, the fact-checker informs the public of the results of the fact-check; sometimes this information is communicated with the help of colorful symbols that make up a rating system.

This thesis is a compilation thesis. Apart from this extended introductory and summary paper (*"kappa"*), this thesis contains four studies, two of which focus on content moderation and two on fact-checking. Three of the four studies have been published as peer-reviewed journal articles and one as a peer-reviewed conference paper.

1.1. Thesis outline

This thesis contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents the research field in which this study is positioned, the aim and research questions of the thesis, and a summary of relevant historical background. In Chapter 2, the thesis proceeds with a review of earlier literature on which this thesis builds and an overview of the research on the topics of transgressive user behaviors in comments sections, misinformation, content moderation, fact-checking, and journalists' practices within information studies. Then, in Chapter 3, the theoretical framework is explored. In Chapter 4, the material on which the research is based and the used methods are reviewed. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the four articles included in the thesis. In Chapter 6, the results are reviewed and discussed, and the main conclusions of the thesis are presented. Chapter 7 provides a Swedish summary of the thesis. Finally, after Chapter 7, the four articles that are part of the thesis are included in a separate section.

1.2. The research field

This study is a doctoral thesis in information studies. Building on the work of, for example, Lloyd (2006, 2011, 2012), Kemmis (2009), Cox (2012, 2013), and Schatzki (2001, 2002), it applies an information practice approach and, more specifically, contributes to information research on social information practices. This means that the thesis is concerned with problems relating to the purpose and conceptualization of the informational aspects of the practices of content moderation and fact-checking.

The four studies included in this thesis take their point of departure in practices that journalists engage in. Due to their information-infused nature, the practices studied here are conceptualized as information practices. While content moderation entails processing and acting upon user-generated information in comments sections, fact-checking entails evaluating information that appears in the form of public claims and responding to these claims by either confirming or correcting them and then communicating this information. Content moderation and fact-checking have evolved through journalists' and news media professionals' interactive work and their use of various kinds of information technology. Like all information practices, content moderation and fact-checking have been shaped by social as well as technological factors.

This thesis investigates how particular *information practices* influence and are influenced by *discourses* within the context of digital journalism, a context that, drawing on Lloyd (2006, 2011, 2017a), is theorized as an *information landscape*.

Building on McKenzie (2003a), Pilerot and Limberg (2011), and Talja and Hansen (2006), practices and discourses are understood to produce new ways of interacting with, creating, and understanding structures for maintaining and developing strategies of doing things that are meaningful to the people who engage in them. Different strategies are negotiated and made official within the professional community by those who engage in them. According to McKenzie (2003b), knowledge is constructed through discourse, and this thesis also recognizes that practices influence discourse and vice versa. Practices are dialogically produced through an interactive process involving many people.

Following Hanseth and Lundberg (2001), Shove et al. (2015), and Star and Ruhleder (1996), this thesis also draws on the concept of *information infrastructure*. This concept is used to explain how the relevant practices and discourses are supported by and tied to their context, i.e., the *information landscape* in which they occur. This means that information infrastructure provides a perspective from which to inquire into the structure that helps practices and discourses connect with each other and with the surrounding landscape in which genres are produced.

The concept of *genre* is used to describe how content moderation and fact-checking form typified rhetorical responses—that emerge in the nexus of practices, discourses, and their supporting infrastructures—to a situation in which user misconduct and the spreading of misinformation are understood to be problems. This concept, which builds on Miller’s (1984) understanding of genre as a rhetorical social action, has been widely adopted in information studies, and researchers such as Andersen (2009, 2015b), Foscarini (2015), and Bazerman (2002) have advocated using the concept in understanding socially situated and motivated activities. To explain the emergence of content moderation and fact-checking as typified forms of action, this thesis embraces the research tradition within information studies that conceptualizes genre as a rhetorical response rather than as a term for classification, which is how the concept has traditionally been understood within, for example, literary studies. In other words, in this thesis, genres are understood as socially produced and situated actions (cf. R. Coe et al., 2002) that emerge within the information-heavy context of digital journalism.

By analyzing content moderation and fact-checking through a lens constituted by the five concepts of *information landscape*, *information practices*, *discourse*, *information infrastructure*, and *genre*, this thesis contributes to a more holistic understanding of the process through which new practices emerge and take shape within the specific news media environment of the contemporary information age.

1.3. Aim and research questions

This thesis investigates two specific information practices—content moderation and fact-checking—that have emerged in response to certain user activities occurring within the information landscape of digital journalism. Furthermore, it explores how the practices in concert with their associated discourses and information infrastructures constitute new genres, i.e., typified rhetorical responses to the problems of online user misconduct and the spreading of misinformation.

By studying how journalists and news media professionals experience, handle, and talk about challenging users and user-generated content perceived as upsetting, untruthful, or otherwise problematic, this thesis investigates the emergence of content moderation and fact-checking within the contemporary information landscape of digital journalism.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how the information practices of content moderation and fact-checking are constructed in the information landscape of digital journalism. More specifically, it describes how those practices are constructed through journalists’ and news media professionals’ conceptualization of the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of misinformation.

Table 1 lists the four research questions of this thesis and indicates the particular articles that address them (the main articles are indicated in bold).

Table 1. Research questions.

Research question:	Addressed in studies:
RQ1: How do journalists understand the information practices they engage in?	I , II, III, IV
RQ2: What discourses on the emerging information practices of journalists can be identified?	I, II, III, IV
RQ3: What are the infrastructural constituents of journalists' information practices in relation to the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of mis-information?	I, II , III
RQ4: How do new rhetorical journalistic genres emerge through journalists' enactment of information practices in the information landscape of digital journalism?	III

The left-hand column of Table 1 presents the four research questions of this thesis, while the right-hand column presents the particular studies addressing the respective research questions. Although most articles addressed more than one question, the degree to which an article contributed to answering the different questions varies. Therefore, the article number of the study that was most crucial for answering a question is highlighted in the right-hand column.

It is also important to note that the order of the questions as presented in the table does not reflect the chronological order of the articles' publication dates. While Article I presents the findings that are most central for answering RQ1, Article IV reports results that were pivotal for answering RQ2. Similarly, Article II contributed the most to answering RQ3 and the findings of Article III were essential to answering RQ4.

1.4. Background

This section presents background information for understanding contemporary digital journalism, which forms the context of the thesis and its four studies. In the following section, historical background to digital journalism and the two information practices of content moderation and fact-checking is provided.

1.4.1. Digital journalism

Both the content moderation of news media comments sections and contemporary fact-checking are parts of a media culture that we have grown accustomed to. However, as we will see, both practices are relatively new ways of doing things. Rather than representing a direct continuation of earlier practices, they have evolved within the emerging context of digital journalism. While some researchers have argued that the news media has been quick to innovate (Singer et al., 2011), others have claimed that it has generally been cautious in its approach to innovation (Boczkowski, 2004; Domingo, 2011; Krzyżanowski, 2014; A. O. Larsson, 2011) and criticized it for being slow to adapt to the changes made possible by new technology (Karlsson et al., 2015; Krzyżanowski, 2014; A. O. Larsson, 2011). The news media has certainly not embraced all the opportunities that new technologies have offered (Singer et al., 2011). However, we must remember that digital journalism is barely thirty years old (cf. Quandt, 2011).

The rapid breakthrough of the Internet has obviously had an impact on the news industry, and, as several researchers (Baughman, 2015; Greer & Mensing, 2006; Li, 2006a, 2006b) have emphasized, this involved many challenges. Although the impact that the Internet has had on how news is produced, communicated, and consumed is immense, the changes that the news media has undergone have not been driven by technological innovation alone. On the contrary, apart from the technical issues of the earlier years of digital journalism, the news media has also had to navigate the changing business environment of online news production (Picard, 2015). Circulation and subscription numbers fell once a lot of news was available for free on the Internet. In addition to this, the recession following the financial crisis in the mid-2000s saw declining revenue from advertising (Baughman, 2015; Vujanovic, 2011).

Although journalism cannot be separated from its technologies (Zelizer, 2019), the role of the Internet and digital technology in journalism as a cultural practice should not be exaggerated. These technologies do not define journalism. As important as the technical tools have been in the process of the news media moving online, this change was as much brought about by institutions, people, and historical processes (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Steensen, 2011; Zelizer, 2019). Although the Arpanet, the forerunner of

the Internet, had been operational since 1969 (Boczkowski, 2004; Harrison & Barthel, 2009), it was not until the first Internet browser became publicly available in 1993 that news became available on the web. Only a trickle of newspapers went online before 1995 (Boczkowski, 2004), which was the year when important news outlets began producing websites (Dessauer, 2004). Having gone from 10,000 registered websites in 1994 to one hundred million in 2002 (Dessauer, 2004), the Internet was becoming part of the public sphere. However, in the early years of digital journalism, websites were more frequently used to introduce news outlets than to broadcast news, and it was not until around 1996 that news outlets seriously started to use them to feature news (Li, 2006a). Major Swedish news outlets, including the national public-service television broadcaster Sveriges Television (SVT) and morning newspapers such as *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), have been online since the late 1990s.

Contemporary news outlets use multiple tools that allow users to interact with them and with other users by, for example, allowing them to share news over various social media channels (Hermida, 2011a). The comments sections that we would later become used to seeing below articles on news websites and on social media are another such interactive tool (G. M. Chen & Pain, 2017; Ferrucci & David Wolfgang, 2021; Hille & Bakker, 2014; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Santana, 2011). However, in the mid-2000s, participatory web features such as comments sections were not yet as common as they would later become (Ferrucci & David Wolfgang, 2021).

1.4.2. The emergence of news media comments sections

The emergence of news media comments sections has frequently been associated with the emergence of the increasingly participatory features of the web (J. Braun & Gillespie, 2011). The term “participatory web,” which has been used to frame the collaborative capacity of Web 2.0, is often romantically associated with the civic involvement in political processes that started to happen on social media toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s (Zappavigna, 2012). Indeed, terms such as “citizen journalists” (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Schlieder & Yanenko, 2010; Thurman, 2008) and “social reporting” (Schlieder & Yanenko, 2010) have, according to Zappavigna (2012), emerged through the activities of average users taking on the role of lay journalists and engaging in practices of covering political and social events. In this sense, the Internet and later social media are framed as tools that assist social movements, empower citizen journalism, and support activism (Cernison, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hill, 2013).

By the mid-2000s, the portrayal of the Internet and the online news media as a public sphere in which democratic ideals such as free speech could be enhanced (Farkas & Schou, 2020) was nothing new. Yet, looking in the rear-view mirror, earlier descriptions of the Internet as a democracy-enhancing

space may appear somewhat outmoded. For example, in her contribution to *Wired Women*, Judy Anderson (1996) stated that, since the Internet only judges one by one's postings, it is a "truly non-discriminatory society" (p. 138). According to her, the famous P. Steiner cartoon of a dog at a computer, which appeared in the magazine *The New Yorker* in 1993, had caught the true and blameless spirit of the Internet. The caption of the cartoon reads, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog" (p. 137); indeed, "if you have a cooperative administration ... your name (and thus presumed gender) can be masked or changed" (p. 138). To conceptualize any society, online or otherwise, in which traits such as gender and race have to be masked for someone to be treated fairly or respectfully as non-discriminatory appears outdated, to say the least (cf. Brodnig, 2016).

Also, the narrative has shifted from praising the purported democratic advantages of digital space to giving bleak accounts of the stiff price to be paid for these advantages (Anderson et al., 2014; Farkas & Schou, 2020; Humprrecht et al., 2020). In the 2010s, social media was starting to be criticized for facilitating hate speech (Austin, 2017; Edstrom, 2016; Santana, 2014) and misinformation (Brown, 2018; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). In the words of Farkas and Schou (2020), "many of the features of digital media that were once seen as democratizing are now cast as de-democratizing" (p. 56). With the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media, some of the celebratory conceptions of the Internet evaporated and became considerably more cynical and critical (Dahlgren, 2009; Farkas & Schou, 2020; Hagren Idevall, 2016; Korvela, 2021). As pointed out by Farkas and Schou (2020), "it seems that gloom and despair have replaced prior optimism within a relatively short timeframe" (p. 56). There is, in other words, a sharp contrast between early optimistic notions of online platforms as empowering spaces for interaction (Boler & Nemorin, 2013; Farkas & Schou, 2020) and bleaker contemporary notions that view social media as a powerhouse of propaganda and misinformation that threatens democracy (Boler & Davis, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2020).

However, it is important to note that the Internet had allowed for social interaction of the kind found in contemporary comments sections long before the participatory web emerged as a popular concept. In fact, even before the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, there were significant indications of some of the less commendable ways that the Internet could be used. In the late 1970s, a group of Californian enthusiasts founded a platform that they called CommuniTree. It was one of the very first net-based discussion forums, in which topics of interest were supposed to be discussed in an easygoing and respectful way (Brodnig, 2016). However, four years after its foundation in 1978, it shut down. In the early 1980s, American schools started to get computers with Internet access. Many teenagers spending time in their schools' computer rooms found their way to CommuniTree's discussion forum. Once they had done so, it did not take long until the forum

crashed under the volume of the teenagers' obscene posts. The platform had no built-in security settings to prevent this kind of user from spamming it with obscenities (Brodnig, 2016).

Rheingold (1993), who documented user interaction on the early social platform The Well (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), asked what kinds of humans a progressively more computer-mediated world is turning us into and whether we have any control over such a process of change. Rheingold was generally positive about the possibilities inherent in the new technology. His observations of the interactions in the comments sections of the 1980s and 1990s not only provide insight into the early social practices of the Internet but also chronicle how the new technologies of communication and interaction were conceptualized only a few decades ago. Rheingold, for example, identified the importance of codes of conduct for maintaining online comments sections. Today, codes of conduct are among the most basic documents on which content moderation builds.

As noted by Ksiazek and Springer (2020), the digitalization of news transmission that occurred from the 1990s into the 2000s initiated an increased level of audience participation in journalism that paved the way for comments sections as a mainstream web feature on news sites and below news articles on social media. Starting in the mid-1990s, many newspapers offered stand-alone discussion forums on their websites.

The first newspaper to offer comments sections that were directly connected to articles is thought to have been the now-out-of-print *Rocky Mountain News* from Denver in the USA. As early as 1998, this paper offered comments sections following restaurant and movie reviews (G. M. Chen & Pain, 2017; Ferrucci & David Wolfgang, 2021; Santana, 2011). In 2006, *The Washington Post* started to offer comments sections below news articles in its sports section (Santana, 2011). *The New York Times* followed, and other news outlets around the world that had not already implemented comments sections below news articles on their websites were quick to follow suit. One third of the leading newspapers in the USA were offering comments sections for their news articles in 2007. By 2008, that number had increased to three quarters of the top 100 US newspapers (Hermida, 2011a; Santana, 2011). Reich (2011) portrayed comments sections as a new stage in the participatory practices of the news media. To him, they represent change and a shift away from old-fashioned participative spaces such as letters to the editors and toward less controlled types of participation.

As the Internet grew, the problems inherent in user interaction would gradually attract more attention (Korvela, 2021). User engagement in comments sections on news media websites and the posting of links to blogs in these comments increased between 2007 and 2010, before decreasing considerably starting in 2011 (Karlsson et al., 2015). With a few years to go before Facebook would break through as the major platform for reading and commenting on news, the difficulties of handling user comments were

beginning to become evident (cf. Hermida, 2011b; Robinson, 2010; Santana, 2011). As comments sections became a more common feature on news sites, journalists and news media professionals were starting to find the low quality of many user posts in these sections problematic (cf. Hille & Bakker, 2014; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Meltzer, 2015; Nielsen, 2012; Shanahan, 2018), and the sometimes-vitriolic tone of user discussions was becoming a source of frustration to the news outlets. However, as shown by Reich (2011), many journalists who complained about the low standards of the comments sections and the workload that moderating their content involved still felt that they were necessary in order to retain readers.

Around 2010, news outlets started to move the news-related user discussions that had previously taken place in comments sections on their websites to social media. For example, in 2011, the *Los Angeles Times* moved its comments sections to Facebook (Hille & Bakker, 2014). Facebook was founded in 2004; ten years later, it would be one of the single largest sources of people's daily news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Humprecht et al., 2020). By early 2007, Facebook had already introduced a new project intended to strengthen its ties to the news media. This journalism program included collaborative elements specifically for the news media as well as training for journalists (Andrews, 2020). At that time, Facebook was still not used by the public to discuss news to the extent that it later would be. As discussed in Article I of this thesis, many journalists experienced the time before their news outlets started to offer comments sections on Facebook as a time of uncertainty about how the platform should best be used.

Multiple reasons why the move to Facebook was convenient for news outlets have been identified (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Santana, 2014; Shanahan, 2018). As discussed in Article I, however, some news media professionals have cited changing user habits as the main reason for closing down comments sections on their own sites and moving to Facebook. In 2015, news media outlets experienced a sharp drop in comments on their news sites. Users simply stopped engaging in discussions on the websites once they had started posting comments on Facebook.

The Internet and the news media's use of Facebook did not just provide a platform for reading and commenting on news; it also sped up the processes through which news consumption habits became increasingly dislocated from the sources and platforms that had previously supplied readers with news (Steensen & Westlund, 2020). This development was also accelerated by the introduction of the smartphone, as it provided round-the-clock access to news and further challenged the previous rituals of many news readers. For many, news consumption rituals such as reading the morning newspaper at breakfast and watching the TV news in the evening had started to feel somewhat redundant (Steensen, 2011). As noted by Baughman (2015), an "on-demand" news culture grew rapidly at this time, and tech companies such as Apple and Google played an important role in the development of this news culture

(Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Although this thesis is not about these tech companies as such and this evolution was just as much driven by social and historical as technological aspects (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Steensen, 2011; Zelizer, 2019), these companies do play a role in how journalists engage in the practices of their profession. In this context, it is worth noting that inventions such as Apple's iPhone—"the world's most popular hardware device" (Whittaker, 2019, p. 4)—are part of a process that has changed our ways of engaging with news by helping make it much more available and accessible.

1.4.3. The emergence of fact-checking organizations

The year 2014 was an election year in Sweden, and to many people around this time, social media was becoming a significant platform for reading the news and staying informed about political events (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Humprecht et al., 2020; Levy, 2021; Mitchell & Page, 2013, 2015). The shift in the focus of news consumption and information practices from a traditional to a social media environment involved new challenges. The problem of user misconduct, which was one reason why the news outlets had moved discussion forums and comments sections away from their own websites and onto social media (Hille & Bakker, 2014; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020), was by no means left behind. However, another issue that was attracting increased attention around that time was the spread of misleading information. Although not new, the gravity of this problem became more apparent as new technology and online platforms afforded ways of rapidly spreading inaccurate information (Southwell et al., 2018).

Although the term "fake news" may not have been popularized until more recently (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Guo & Vargo, 2020), the media had been concerned about the spread of misleading information for some time, and a new industry of fact-checkers had begun to emerge in the mid-2000s (Amazeen, 2019; Graves, 2016, 2018; Mena, 2019). The USA is credited as the country of origin of contemporary fact-checking (Amazeen, 2019; Graves, 2018) and pioneering organizations such as FactCheck and PolitiFact were founded in 2003 and 2007 respectively. Inspired by American models, including the well-known fact-checking organization Snopes, the now-out-of-print newspaper *Metro* set up its fact-checking division *Viralgranskaren* in 2014 in Sweden.

In the decade after online fact-checking first emerged, a number of fact-checking organizations and projects appeared around the world. For example, in the Swedish election year of 2018, several major news outlets joined forces in the fact-checking project *Faktiskt* (In fact), which continued until the election was held in September.

Although it has been claimed that checking facts has always been part of what journalists do (Allern & Pollack, 2019), the founding of dedicated fact-

checking organizations took the practice to another level. These organizations specialized in it, and their business model entailed debunking or verifying rumors as well as statements made by politicians (Graves, 2016, 2017, 2018). Fact-checking organizations of this kind have been divided into three different categories (Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2017): first, fact-checkers concerned with political and public statements; second, fact-checkers working to debunk online rumors and news-like reports on the Internet; and finally, fact-checkers specializing in specific topics, for example, a contemporary political issue (Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2017). The Swedish Viralgranskaren can be classified as belonging to the second category, as its main focus was on investigating news-like rumors on the Internet and then rating their content as “false,” “true,” or “mixed.”

Although fact-checking is deeply rooted in journalism, it is important to note that not all fact-checking organizations operate within the journalistic sphere. For example, Snopes is not positioned within a news media tradition. Still, in the literature, the contemporary fact-checking practice that emerged in the mid-2000s has often been associated with news reporting (Graves, 2018; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). It has been seen as a step away from some of the lower-quality, faster-paced styles of online reporting and clickbait headlines (Waisbord, 2018).

Clickbait headlines, i.e., “headlines which offer more than the story delivers” (Duffy et al., 2018, p. 1362), have been used as a narrative device since long before the dawn of the Internet, especially by the yellow press. However, the term got its name from how these headlines are used in a digital environment, i.e., to lure readers to click on a headline as a way of increasing the number of clicks a news article can attract. Although the practice of writing sensationalist and misinformative headlines is not new, the fast-paced digital news environment and the swiftness of clicking are advantageous for drawing attention to news stories (Blom & Hansen, 2015). With the emergence of the Internet, as with the emergence of the telegraph in the nineteenth century (cf. Mindich, 1998; Standage, 2013), the faster speed at which news can travel and be accessed by readers has allowed it to reach a wider audience than ever before. However, the new branch of journalistic practice that we call fact-checking is not a fast-paced process at all (Graves, 2016). Despite having emerged in the same digital news environment as, for example, clickbait practices, the two practices can be understood to stem from fundamentally different journalistic traditions. While it has been argued that clickbaiting stems from a tabloid tradition of producing sensationalist news stories intended to provoke (Blom & Hansen, 2015), contemporary fact-checking has been placed within a tradition of high-quality news journalism (Graves, 2016). As noted by Poulsen and Young (2018), this kind of “journalism, particularly accountability journalism, is a time- and resource-consuming practice” (p. 236).

Fact-checking also differs from traditional journalism in terms of its practice of informing readers of false or dubious content. The use of a rating system like that of, for example, *Viralgranskaren* is popular among contemporary fact-checkers. While *Viralgranskaren* assigned a stamp-like symbol to each published fact-check, which conveyed its rating in red, green, or yellow, the well-known fact-checking organization *Snopes* uses fourteen colorful symbols reminiscent of road signs to denote the outcome of their fact-checks. For example, an inaccurate story is denoted by a symbol depicting a white cross inside a red octagon. *PolitiFact* applies its six famous, and trademarked (Graves, 2016), “Truth-O-Meter” ratings, depicted by a measuring device with a needle pointing in different directions depending on the outcome of the fact-check. The colors red, green, and orange, indicated by a lamp on the device, convey whether the object of the fact-check is “true,” “mostly true,” “half true,” “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire.” If a story has been assigned the “pants on fire” rating, the measuring-device symbol assigned to the fact-check is shown being engulfed in flames. These rating symbols, together with the short caption headlines and simple article structure that fact-checkers often employ when communicating their fact-checking reports, make them easy to read and digest, and the rating system has become a popular feature among fact-checking organizations around the world (Amazeen, 2015; Graves, 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2014).

Just as different techniques for tracking user comments in comments sections constitute relatively new social information practices that professional journalists enact, web features such as the rating systems fact-checkers sometimes use have emerged from a contemporary understanding of what journalism is. It has been debated whether the media has been happy to adapt to the new interactive features of contemporary digital journalism (Chung, 2007; De Maeyer & Delva, 2021; A. O. Larsson, 2011). Does it matter? Is it important to know how journalists feel and think about the practices they engage in? This thesis argues that it is. The shared norms, values, rules, and skills that define the journalistic profession and are embedded in journalists’ daily routines play a role in how professional practices emerge and change in a new work environment (Boczkowski et al., 2004; Paulussen, 2011). To say anything about how and why these changes come about, it is important to understand how journalists conceptualize and act out their relationship with their audience through their information practices.

2. Literature review

This chapter presents an overview of the research relating to content moderation and fact-checking, and reviews the literature that this thesis builds on. Both content moderation and fact-checking have been extensively explored by scholars of media studies and journalism within the framework of their discipline. Their research is valuable for the insight it offers into what journalists do, say, and feel when they engage in either of the two practices. Although this thesis also explores and recognizes content moderation and fact-checking as journalistic undertakings, they are, like the landscape in which they are set, also understood as the result of broader processes and changes that have contributed to how information is handled, communicated, and presented in contemporary society. It is in relation to these processes and changes that journalists have to adjust their norms and practices. It is in relation to the broader social processes in particular that they have to negotiate what they do and why they do it.

The problems that have contributed to the need for content moderation and fact-checking, such as antagonistic user behavior and the spreading of misinformation, are not limited to a journalistic context. Rather, they constitute broader phenomena enabled by how information is shared and understood in contemporary society. Journalists are not the only ones who have to deal with the problems of users acting in ways understood as hostile, and they are not the only ones who perceive the spreading of misinformative and inaccurate content as problematic. Yet, it is their handling of these problems that has contributed to the evolution of journalistic practices. Taking an information perspective when studying these practices enables us to understand journalists' engagement in content moderation and fact-checking as practices in an information world rather than as activities that are performed within the narrower space of the news media industry.

In this thesis, content moderation is understood as a response to a kind of online user behavior perceived as transgressive. Likewise, fact-checking is understood as a response to the perceived problem of false and misleading information being spread online and elsewhere.

Therefore, in the first two sections, earlier research on problematic user posts in comments sections and the spreading of misinformation will be reviewed. The first section discusses research on user misconduct and the

second mis- and disinformation. This is done to gain a better understanding of what has triggered the practices studied here.

Following this, this chapter will proceed to discuss research on comments sections, content moderation, and contemporary fact-checking in two sections.

Both content moderation and fact-checking have been studied to a considerable extent within the field of media studies and journalism; to build a substantial body of evidence from which to draw conclusions, this thesis has taken advantage of valuable findings from this field. However, as the analytical gaze applied in this thesis is located within information studies, the literature review concludes with a review of earlier information studies research on journalists' practices.

2.1. Online misconduct

Research on problematic user behaviors has increased since the early- and mid-1990s, when Rheingold (1993) documented the interaction of users on the social platform The Well. Antagonistic user activities online and their various consequences have been the focus of scholarly investigations in many different disciplines such as psychology and sociology (e.g., Pettersson, 2019; Räsänen et al., 2016; Vranjes et al., 2018) and modern languages (e.g., Hagren Idevall, 2016; Hopkinson, 2013). Extensive research on online misconduct in connection with the work of journalists has been conducted within the field of media studies and journalism (e.g., Adams, 2018; G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Post & Kepplinger, 2019).

Although there is a research gap regarding the relationship between journalists and misbehaving users specifically within the field of information studies, a growing body of scholarly work applies an information perspective in exploring the problem of online incivility and user misconduct in general (e.g., Austin, 2017; Y. Chen, 2018; Cruz et al., 2018; Herring et al., 2002; Kunst et al., 2021; Shachaf & Hara, 2010; Sharma et al., 2020; Tham & Wang, 2017).

With the introduction of social media, research on the disruptive aspects of online interaction expanded greatly. Various terms have been claimed to frame different and multiple digital user behaviors that are considered offensive. Common terms for labeling offensive user behavior are trolling (Cruz et al., 2018; Herring et al., 2002; Phillips, 2015), hate speech (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012), cyberbullying (Peker, 2015; Vranjes et al., 2018), online harassment (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), flaming (Cho & Kwon, 2015; Moor et al., 2010), and dark participation (Frischlich et al., 2019; Quandt, 2011).

Although there is general agreement that the terms “online troll” and “Internet troll” are used to describe someone who behaves offensively on the

Internet, there are different explanations for the origin of the noun “troll” and the verb “trolling” (Phillips, 2015). Trolling is said to derive from fishing terminology, in which it means throwing out a baited hook and slowly trailing it behind the boat while the fisher waits for the fish to bite (Phillips, 2015). Judith Donath (1999) coined the metaphoric use of “trolling” when describing a particular kind of deliberately misleading user behavior that she had observed on the newsgroups of the online forum Usenet. Yet, as the term “troll” is also reminiscent of the folkloric creature from Scandinavian mythology, common depictions symbolically make a connection between insolent online users and the wild mythological beasts that trample villages, kill decent people, eat their cattle, and snatch their babies.

Susan Herring et al. (2002), Claire Hardaker (2010), and Whitney Phillips (2015) have all used the term “trolling.” In her book *Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, Phillips (2015) argued, for example, that tabloid journalism and the sensationalist news media environment are hotbeds for online trolls. This popular term has also been used by Cruz et al. (2018), Edstrom (2016), and Shachaf and Hara (2010).

Erjavec and Kovačič (2012) referred to *hate speech* as an “expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, and/or incites to violence, hatred, or discrimination” (p. 900). The authors also defined it as being directed against people “on the basis of race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, physical condition, disability, sexual orientation, political conviction, and so forth” (p. 900). Leaning on Erjavec and Kovačič (2012), Kunst et al. (2021) similarly defined the concept as “abusive expressions that incite violence” (p. 258). These definitions of hate speech are, in other words, not that different from the definitions of various other offensive forms of user behavior online. For example, Adem Peker (2015) defined *cyberbullying* as “using internet or digital communication technologies to harm others” (p. 58). Chen et al. (2017) used the terms “cyberbullying” and “online harassment” synonymously, while “flaming” was referred to by Hopkinson (2013) as “the practice of aiming personal insults at other posters” (p. 7) in an online context.

Another broadly used term is “dark participation.” Frischlich et al. (2019) and Quandt (2018) have used this as a generic term for a number of different offensive things that users do on the Internet. The shared feature of these activities, however, is their transgressive nature: in one way or another, these activities are considered to transgress, for example, the norm of politeness (cf. Papacharissi, 2004).

What all these terms share is that they represent different kinds of activities that Internet users have been known to engage in that are generally considered abusive, disruptive, or otherwise offensive.

In this thesis, “user misconduct” and “disruptive user behavior” are used as preferred terms to refer to online misconduct due to their genericness and their capacity to cover a broad range of antagonistic activities that users have been

known to engage in online. Although often used to describe such activities, the symbolic connotations of the term “trolling” make it problematic to use. Using the term “dark participation” in a generic sense can be similarly problematic due to its unnecessarily dramatic emphasis on the destructive nature of such activities.

One reason why all these deviant forms of online user behavior are perceived as problematic is, to put it simply, that they are hurtful to those targeted by them (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Phillips, 2015; Räsänen et al., 2016). As some of the effects of these behaviors include frightening and silencing members of a community, which aligns badly with the journalistic ambition to be inclusive and give people a voice (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Post & Kepplinger, 2019), it is hardly surprising that the news media has taken on the role of moderating discussions in which aggressive behaviors occur.

While the spaces provided by the news media for users to interact in have been conceptualized as platforms that enable the democratic right to free speech (Reader, 2012; Shanahan, 2018), some of the content posted on these platforms is recognized as obstructing the same democratic principles that these spaces were intended to facilitate (Reader, 2012). Quite apart from libel laws that regulate the content on news providers’ websites (Rowbottom, 2012), it has been discussed whether a high degree of hate in comments sections may diminish trust in news outlets (Kunst, 2021).

The practices studied here are understood to be triggered by Internet users’ activities that are perceived to be transgressive. In articles I and II, these activities are performed by people who interact in online comments sections in ways perceived as problematic by the journalists who maintain these sections. In response to this problem, they therefore conduct content moderation as part of their organizations’ maintenance of comments sections. As we have seen, the particular problem of misbehaving users has been extensively framed within the scope of journalism and media studies research. However, this kind of research is, regrettably, still relatively scarce within information studies. An information studies perspective would enable a better understanding of the problem in a broader social context than that of the immediate news media environment.

2.2. Misinformation and disinformation

Research on inaccurate information that may lead to people developing misrepresentative understandings often uses the specific concepts of misinformation (Cappella et al., 2018; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Young, 2018), disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Fallis, 2015; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Siegert et al., 2017), or both (Rubin, 2019; S e, 2017, 2021). For obvious reasons, the two concepts have constituted topics of particular interest within the discipline of information studies (e.g., Fallis, 2015; Rubin, 2019; S e, 2017; Stahl, 2006; Sullivan, 2019).

Both concepts predate the Internet, and people have, as Southwell et al. (2018) observed, “lied to each other for roughly as long as verbal communication has existed” (p. 1). However, both these terms have been widely used to describe false or misleading information that is spread through digital information channels (Rubin, 2019; S e, 2017; Young, 2018). As noted by Young (2018), the digital information environment of the Internet, with its user-generated content and easy access, sometimes makes it more difficult to distinguish between facts and fiction.

Although scholars have distinguished between the concepts, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably and synonymously with each other, and with the otherwise popular term “fake news” (Abu Arqoub et al., 2022; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; McGonagle, 2017), to describe the problem of misinformative and inaccurate content online. For example, as implied by the term, the label “fake news” is more often used to describe inaccurate *news-like* rumors (McGonagle, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018) while the meaning of mis- and disinformation usually implies something broader.

As noted by Stahl (2006), misinformation is usually understood as inaccurate and misleading information, while disinformation is often used to denote intentionally inaccurate information. This distinction was also made by Rubin (2019); however, in her study of deceptive and misleading news content, she went one step further and defined misinformation as unintentionally inaccurate and misleading information and disinformation as intentionally deceptive information. In her study, she applied an epidemiological disease triangle model to analyze mis- and disinformation as virulent pathogens, suggesting three types of intervention: automation, education, and regulation.

In a conceptual study of disinformation, the information scientist Don Fallis (2015) defined disinformation as misleading information, arguing that disinformation is also “a particularly problematic type of misinformation” (p. 402). Building on Grice’s understanding of the natural and non-natural meanings of words, S e (2021) differentiated between natural and non-natural information and identified three types of non-natural information: “intentionally non-misleading information, unintentionally misleading

information—i.e., misinformation—and intentionally misleading information—i.e., disinformation” (p. 5929).

Søe (2021) observed that the connection between the concepts of mis- and disinformation and that of information often seems to concern truth, meaning, and intention. Stahl (2006) also observed that mis- and disinformation are represented as something that is considered untrue while the concept of information is represented as something that is true. By applying the critical theories of Foucault and Habermas, Stahl (2006) could discuss the difficulty of basing a distinction between information, misinformation, and disinformation on the concept of truth. Using Foucault and Habermas in this framework has been helpful in order to investigate, for example, the role of emotions in information practices (Olsson, 2013) or how information creates social worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), and the two theoreticians have inspired many scholars within library and information studies (e.g., Dewey, 2020; Hansen et al., 2009; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Lindh, 2015; Olsson, 2013). Within this field, their theoretical reasonings are often considered useful for investigating information-related issues in general. Drawing on Habermas and Foucault, Stahl (2006) found that since there is no agreement on what truth is, there is consequently no consensus on how to define the concept of information either.

It has been argued that, if effective, mis- and disinformation can cause considerable harm to those affected (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Fallis, 2015; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Rubin, 2019). Why then are mis- and disinformation perceived as so problematic? Apart from the obvious risk of hurt to the people who are directly misled by inaccurate claims (Fallis, 2015), the most common answer to this question lies in the potential damage that mis- and disinformation may do to society, especially to a democratic society (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Pickard, 2019). A well-informed public is a prerequisite for any functioning democracy (Cappella et al., 2018; Green & Donahue, 2018; Southwell et al., 2018), and knowledge, according to Dahlgren (2009), is often believed to underpin citizens’ engagement in civic society. As democracy is for the citizens, it requires civic engagement in order to function. Therefore, if the public lacks knowledge or if its knowledge is based on misleading or inaccurate information, it is believed that democracy will not function properly (Dahlgren, 2009). Scholars have identified the risk of mis- and disinformation undermining trust in official information and in social institutions such as the media (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Pickard, 2019).

As the media is believed to play a crucial part in the process of keeping the public up to date, thereby contributing to a well-informed citizenry (Poulsen & Young, 2018), high-quality journalism can be understood as an essential antidote to those who spread inaccurate information. In fact, although often represented as a problem of the post-truth era (Boler & Davis, 2018; Renner & Spencer, 2018; Rochlin, 2017), the spread of misinformation is also

explained as due to a decline in journalism (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2020) and the transition to online news production (Carson & Farhall, 2018). It has, however, also been observed that there is in fact no consensus on the correlation between declining journalistic quality, the spread of misinformative content, and an emerging post-truth society (Farkas & Schou, 2020).

The concept of “post-truth” has also been equated with “post-fact” (Peters, 2017), and scholars argue that discourses on journalists’ relationship to truth and facts often tend to be very nostalgic, romanticizing the past as a time when journalists were still seen as representatives of the truth (Farkas & Schou, 2020). According to these discourses, society and democracy are perceived as doomed by the loss of the news media gatekeepers and watchdogs able to perform high-quality journalism (Farkas & Schou, 2020).

As it is the reaction, i.e., the content moderation and fact-checking, to the problem of the spread of inaccurate information rather than the problem itself that is the focus of this thesis, distinguishing between the concepts of mis- and disinformation is not crucial in this thesis.

2.3. Comments sections and content moderation

As content moderation has become integral to the maintenance of news media comment sections, research on comments sections is often concerned with content moderation as well as various other aspects of the work that comments sections involve.

As news media comments sections became a more popular web feature and user interaction increased, the importance of content moderation as an aspect of the maintenance of comments sections became more apparent. It is therefore difficult to separate research on comments sections and research on content moderation. For this reason, the two topics are discussed together in this section.

As news media comments sections have become a typified feature in the communication of news, it is unsurprising that most research on content moderation has been conducted within the discipline of journalism and media studies. Although attention has been paid to content moderation occurring outside the news context, directed toward, for example, commercial content moderation and toward the moderation and curation of social media comments sections (e.g., Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019), research on content moderation taking an explicitly information-related perspective is, to the author’s knowledge, scarce.

According to Ksiazek and Springer (2020), news media comments sections in which users can post their opinions fall into the category of audience feedback, along with several other practices such as letters to the editor. However, as the authors also note, the digital environment and its interactive

features have helped make the practice of maintaining comments sections into a distinct type of audience engagement. Of all the various interactive features intended to encourage audience engagement with the news media, research has found that journalists perceive comments to be the most difficult to maintain (E.-J. Lee, 2012; Meltzer, 2015; Nielsen, 2012; Santana, 2011). In 2011, Larsson noted that the Swedish newspaper audience was “hesitant to interact” and contemplated whether this could be ascribed to an “institutional respect towards the media organisations” (p. 1194). He then went on to criticize the news media for not making a serious attempt to create something more constructive out of the comments sections on their websites, emphasizing the need to put more effort into adapting news sites to the needs of their users (A. O. Larsson, 2011).

Comments sections have been understood as tools that allow news outlets to listen to the public voice and engage the audience in their publishing process (Springer et al., 2015; Weber, 2014). However, the impact that user posts have or should have on the news media’s selection of stories has been debated (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). Heinonen (2011), for example, argued that the sentiments that users express in comments sections provide journalists with a source of ideas for forthcoming reportage. The digital techniques used to achieve this have evolved since Heinonen’s (2011) study, and automatic detection tools are more often used to identify and gather information about trending topics (Häring et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2017; Kolhatkar et al., 2020), as well as to track abusive content or misinformation posted by users. A growing body of research relates to the application of AI in content moderation. Concerns about letting the audience engage in the journalistic production process have also been expressed. While Karlsson (2011) reflected on the impact user participation of this kind may have on journalists’ role as news producers, other scholars have identified more practical implications such as economic challenges (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008).

Although journalists often talk about user participation and interactivity as integral to online news production (Domingo, 2011; Heinonen, 2011; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009), some scholars have argued that how the profession is understood by its practitioners makes it inflexible to change and impedes adaptation to new practices of participatory journalism (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Spyridou et al., 2013). Some scholars have indicated that journalists are not always enthusiastic about engaging with their audiences in the production of content (Krzyżanowski, 2014; Santana, 2011; Thurman, 2008). A particular criticism of the interactive space constituted by the comments sections of news articles has been raised by Ye and Li (2006) who, in their 2006 study, stated that “forums were mostly unmoderated and that journalists rarely participated in the discussion. Online newspapers might view interactive forums merely as ‘reader playgrounds’” (p. 255).

As already mentioned, news media comments sections started to appear on news outlets’ websites in the late 1990s. As argued by Braun and Gillespie

(2011), these comments sections helped create news media platforms for an unruly “user community that does not always honor the norms of journalism” (p. 385).

In the mid-2000s, comments sections started relocating to social media. Later, some news outlets that had been maintaining comments sections on their own news sites started shutting them down (Liu & McLeod, 2021). Even in the early days of comments sections, the problem of users transgressing the norms of what is considered polite discussion was noted and offensive user posts in news media comments sections became a growing concern (Donath, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). Scholars have found that uncivil user posts, for example, those using misogynistic and sexist language, played a crucial role in decisions either to shut down comments sections or to move them to social media (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020).

Offensive user posts in news media comments sections have been found to affect journalists’ health and well-being to such an extent that they self-censor and avoid interacting with users. This means that comments sections give journalists cause to avoid certain topics if they fear that these may evoke hostile audience reactions (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Stahel & Schoen, 2020).

Research also indicates that female journalists are more likely than their male colleagues to be attacked online and that abusive comments directed toward women are of a severer and often more sexual nature than those directed toward their male peers (Adams, 2018; G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Stahel & Schoen, 2020). Comments sections have reportedly been used as platforms for spreading conspiracy theories (Bessi et al., 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016) and other mis- and disinformative content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Anspach & Carlson, 2020; King et al., 2017; O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019). Offensive comments have also been found, at least in the short term, to influence an article’s impact on the audience in a negative way (Heinbach et al., 2018; Liu & McLeod, 2021; Winter et al., 2015).

In studies framing the strategies of online communities targeted by, for example, trolling (Hardaker, 2010; Herring et al., 2002; Phillips, 2015), the technical aspects of administering online forums have often been in focus (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Gorwa et al., 2020; Ros et al., 2015). In a study of the disruption caused by trolls on Wikipedia, Shachaf and Hara (2010) documented how Wikipedia communities work to defend themselves against trolling attacks from an information systems perspective. How to deal with aggressive or offensive user-generated content is of interest to research that focuses on ways of conducting content moderation. Some scholars understand content moderation as a form of gatekeeping (Boberg et al., 2018; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Wolfgang, 2018). After all, it is the moderators who have the power to select which comments are to be published or removed and whose voices are to be heard and whose not. As pointed out by Ksiazek and Springer (2020), the decision-making processes that define content moderation

“constitute a gray area, which is only negotiable between moderators and users if moderators are open to such conversations and to revisions of their decisions” (p. 9). In her ethnographic study “Traditionalists vs. Convergents” (2010), Robinson found considerable conflict among both moderators and users about how much freedom users should be allowed in comments sections.

The experience of maintaining comments sections has taught news outlets the importance of policy documents and codes of conduct intended to regulate their interaction with their audiences (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). Whether these policies include rules about allowing or not allowing users to remain anonymous when commenting or whether they conduct content moderation before or after user posts become visible to other users may vary (Domingo, 2011). Most news outlets today maintain some form of content moderation.

The effectiveness of various strategies for maintaining a polite and civil discussion environment in comments sections has been studied by, for example, Coe et al. (2014), Ksiazek (2015, 2018), and Ksiazek and Springer (2020). A common strategy for combating incivility in comments sections that has attracted increasing interest in the literature is counterspeech. One example of a civic initiative that engages in counterspeech is the non-profit organization #JagÄrHär (#IAmHere), which is examined in Article II of this thesis and whose German wing, #IchBinHier, has been studied by Ziegele et al. (2020).

The form of content moderation that users are known to engage in has been labeled “corrective action” (Ziegele et al., 2020). Members of the audience have the ability to protest against the posts of other users by reporting them or by using flags or dislike features that may be embedded in the interface of the platform on which the discussion is occurring. Although bystanders have been found to be less likely to intervene on someone else’s behalf in an online environment (Obermaier et al., 2016), participants in comments sections are known to speak up and object to the tone of posts that they find offensive (Ziegele et al., 2020). Transparency concerning codes of conduct has been found to inspire users to engage more in content moderation (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Naab et al., 2018).

As new technological tools emerge with which to maintain news media comments sections, functions for content moderation are included. Although comments sections have been around since the 1990s, they are an interactive feature that is still very much in a state of flux. It is only since 2016, when this research project started, that the comments sections on some of the studied news media websites that had been shut down in favor of discussions on Facebook have started to reopened. Although the interface may have changed slightly and the format of the discussions may be more controlled than was formerly the case, two of the newspapers studied in this thesis that had once made the decision to maintain such interaction only on social media have reintroduced comments sections on their own websites. As these changes have consequences outside the immediate news context, influencing public

discourse on how information is to be discussed and understood on a broader social level, the modest amount of attention that content moderation and the curation of comments sections have received within information studies is regrettable. By underscoring the importance of content moderation from an information studies perspective, this thesis highlights the role that content moderation plays in shaping cultural norms and production in society.

2.4. Contemporary fact-checking

Just as the literature on the content moderation of disruptive posts in comments sections is connected to research on antagonistic user behaviors online, much of the literature on contemporary fact-checking is related to the topic of mis- and disinformation or otherwise misrepresentative content that is spread online.

Contemporary fact-checking as a genre emerged in the mid-2000s as a new specialized practice of correcting false or misleading public claims (Amazeen, 2020), and many of the organizations working with fact-checking are news media outlets or organizations that have ties to journalism.

However, some scholars (e.g., Graves, 2018) have recognized the cross-disciplinary nature of the genre, which draws on practices from academia, the political sphere, and journalism. Despite this, fact-checking is predominantly recognized as a journalistic practice (Allern & Pollack, 2019; Amazeen, 2015; Graves, 2016, 2018; Graves & Anderson, 2020; Mena, 2019). In fact, some scholars have labeled fact-checking a new “type” (Amazeen, 2015) or “genre” (Graves & Anderson, 2020) of journalism or reporting. Research has also shown that journalists themselves tend to understand fact-checking as one of their professional responsibilities (Graves, 2016; Graves & Anderson, 2020; Mena, 2019). One reason for this is that the practice is understood to reproduce many of journalism’s values and ideals (Graves et al., 2016). Just as independent journalism is considered crucial to democracy, fact-checking’s democratic capacity to inform citizens’ political awareness has been recognized (Amazeen, 2019, 2020; Graves, 2016, 2018; Mena, 2019; Singer, 2021; York et al., 2020).

Other scholars have highlighted the limited effects of fact-checking (Garrett et al., 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2014; Sanna et al., 2002). Still others have even argued that fact-checking may be counterproductive (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Sanna et al., 2002) and that biases among fact-checkers can have an effect opposite to that intended (Uscinski, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). However, fact-checking is usually understood as a way to establish truth, correct information, and sustain the news media’s objectivity and credibility as an institution (Amazeen, 2015; Damasceno & Patrício, 2020; Graves, 2016). Objectivity and credibility, together with autonomy, are

understood as essential principles of the contemporary journalistic tradition (Poulsen & Young, 2018).

Just as ideas about democracy are found to underpin how interactive practices are legitimized (Hermida, 2011b; Van Duyn et al., 2021), democratic principles are also found to legitimize fact-checking practices (York et al., 2020). Once again, these are practices that occur within a perceived struggle between, on the one hand, empowering free speech and, on the other, combating the forces that use digital media to suppress, silence, or misinform others. In other words, digital media have been conceptualized as both enhancing and harming democracy (McNair, 2018; Rider & Peters, 2018). Holding the power to establish truth and empower citizens, fact-checking can also be conceptualized as a practice that strengthens democracy (York et al., 2020). Intertwined with this dualistic notion of how the Internet is connected to ideas of democracy are ideas about the social role of the news media, for example, the above-mentioned ideas about the news media as a public space that does not just inform citizens but also gives them a voice (Broussard, 2003; Joseph, 2016; Pulido et al., 2021).

Considering that fact-checking has been understood to uphold journalistic values and norms (Amazeen, 2015; Damasceno & Patrício, 2020), it is interesting that the emergence of contemporary fact-checking has been ascribed to changing journalistic norms (Amazeen, 2020), and Graves (2016) has described fact-checkers as the reformers of journalism.

One particular ideal that is recognized as playing an important role in how fact-checking is portrayed is that of *trust*. This is perhaps unsurprising since research has displayed growing interest in exploring public trust in the news media in general (Gunther, 1992; Kalsnes & Krumsvik, 2019; T.-T. Lee, 2010; Park et al., 2020; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Williams, 2012; Wise & McLaughlin, 2016). As contemporary fact-checking is understood to share many of the values inherent to the traditional news media, the importance of building trust is of course recognized within this particular context of media studies research (Amazeen, 2020; Kalsnes & Krumsvik, 2019; Singer, 2021). The problem of public trust in democratic institutions and information, or the lack thereof, is one that has been scrutinized within information studies (Ahmad & Huvila, 2019; Gomez & Gould, 2010; Haider & Sundin, 2020; Sundin & Carlsson, 2016) and has also been relevant in a library science context (Batchelor, 2017; Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007; Sullivan, 2019; Vårheim, 2014).

Another idea that recurs in discussions of the purpose of contemporary fact-checking in the news media landscape is that fact-checking has the capacity to educate and empower (Amazeen, 2020). The perceived need to educate and empower postulates a perceived lack of something that is required in order to be sufficiently educated and empowered. Within information studies, this perceived lack has been discussed in terms of information poverty (Britz, 2004; Chatman, 1996; Haider & Bawden, 2007). This concept is closely connected to that of information literacy (Britz, 2004; McKeown, 2016).

Although not usually conceptualized as a literacy project, the educational and pedagogical aspects of contemporary fact-checking have been recognized and highlighted (Amazeen, 2019, 2020). Again, this is perhaps unsurprising as one of the purposes of the news media in general is to enlighten and inform the public.

Poulsen and Young (2018) argued that the routinization of independent fact-checking organizations is one of the many results of the changes that journalism has undergone over the last three decades. Whether or not contemporary fact-checking is to be understood as a new type of journalism, the practice is becoming increasingly widespread and accepted as a way both to counteract the problem of mis- and disinformation and to communicate accurate news to the public.

As the practice of fact-checking has to some extent been “appropriated” by news media professionals, it is, as in the case of content moderation, unsurprising that much of the research into this topic is to be found within media studies. Although the fact-checkers studied in Article III have strong ties to journalism (with the exception of Snopes), this thesis nuances fact-checking not just as a journalistic practice but also as a product of broader cultural and social discourses.

2.5. Information studies research on journalists

To the author’s knowledge, research on the specific information practices of content moderation and fact-checking from an information studies perspective is scarce. In contrast, other information practices of journalists have been explored within the field somewhat more comprehensively. Similarly, while journalists’ actions to counter mis- and disinformation have not been discussed extensively in the information studies literature, this literature has discussed librarians’ comparable practices in more detail. For example, Sullivan (2019) explored the role of librarians in combating misinformation and restoring trust in traditional journalism in a study of libraries’ ability to correct misrepresentations on social media. In that study, Sullivan found that the capacity of libraries to reduce misrepresentation spread on social media is very limited.

Gilbert et al. (2021) highlighted the fundamental differences in the approaches driven by two professional groups, i.e., journalists and librarians. While journalists fact-check, librarians teach information literacy. Thus, both professional groups are engaged in combating mis- and disinformation. However, the librarians’ information literacy work includes educational activities that reinforce people’s ability to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy information rather than fact-checking.

Gilbert et al. (2021) have provided an up-to-date overview of information studies research on journalists’ information-seeking behavior. In their study,

the authors set their findings alongside Kuhlthau's (1993, 1999) seminal concepts of information-seeking processes. In particular, it is journalists' information needs (Nicholas & Martin, 1997) and information-seeking practices (Attfield & Dowell, 2003; Fabritius, 1998; Gilbert et al., 2021) that have been in focus when journalists have been investigated from an information studies perspective.

Literature on journalists' information seeking goes back to the early days of digital journalism. In one study from 1998, Fabritius investigated the information-seeking activities of journalists. In the early days of digital journalism, research interest in "computer-assisted journalism" (Fabritius, 1998) was on the agenda. Against this background, the author explored how journalists at one major Finnish newspaper utilized information technology in their work. Information seeking is also the focus of Attfield and Dowell's (2003) exploration of both information seeking and information use by journalists at one British newspaper. In the study, the authors developed a three-stage model of journalists' information-seeking processes and gave an account of how journalists "manage and develop their internal and external resource space better to support their goals" (p. 202). They also describe the role that uncertainty plays in the information-seeking process.

MacMillan (2009) positioned her longitudinal study of the information skills of journalism students within information literacy research, providing insight into the information literacy processes of the students. One research topic within information studies related to information seeking is that of serendipitous encounters with information. Bird-Meyer et al. (2019) applied a library and information perspective when investigating journalists' use of serendipitous information acquisition for news stories. The authors found that, historically, serendipitous encounters have been important for innovations within multiple fields and in journalism in particular. Many of the respondents taking part in the study testified that their experiences of what they thought of as serendipitous encounters had been important to their ideation and reporting.

The role of emotion in the information practices of journalists is another related topic that has been explored by Michael Olsson (2013). Applying a Foucauldian perspective in a study of the information practices of theater professionals and journalists, he found that social norms and practices govern how the practitioners articulate and construct ideas.

Although the topic of mis- and disinformation has been widely explored within information studies, the connection of this research to journalists' information practices is weak. As a whole, previous research on journalists within the information studies field is, in fact, rather limited and the main body of literature is primarily positioned within the scholarly domain of information seeking.

3. Theory

This chapter describes the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will start by elaborating on the *information landscape* in which the *information practices* of and *discourses* on content moderation and fact-checking take place. It will further lay out how these practices and discourses shape and are shaped by one another. Furthermore, it will discuss the role of *information infrastructures* as enforcing structures underpinning practices and discourses. Finally, it will deliberate on *genres* as settled rhetorical and typified responses to new situations of disruptive user behavior and the spreading of misinformation.

Articles I and II in this thesis use a practice approach to examine how the content of comments sections is handled in the context of the news media. Article I, which investigates emerging practices for managing user misconduct in online media comments sections, employs a variant of practice theory that draws on the environmental notion of Lloyd's (2006) "information landscape" to investigate the connection between the examined practices and the context in which they occur. Following Schatzki (2002), in Article I, a practice is understood as "a 'bundle' of activities, that is to say, an organized nexus of actions" (p. 71). However, unlike Schatzki, this thesis does not go as far as to claim that nothing happens outside of practices. In this thesis, the practice approach is one of several perspectives from which the undertakings of journalists are studied and understood. One of the most significant differences from Schatzki is that this thesis analytically distinguishes between practices (as doings) and discourses (as sayings) when inquiring into how content moderation and fact-checking are discussed and acted out.

Article II continues the same practice-based line of thought. However, in this study, practice thinking has been applied to gain insight into the infrastructural formations that link practices together in the social space of online news media comments sections.

Article III, which focuses on contemporary fact-checking, draws on the concept of genre as a typified rhetorical situation (Miller, 1984) to explain the emergence of contemporary fact-checking as an established way of acting.

Finally, Article IV seeks to understand how a contemporary fact-checking practice is discursively constructed in the Swedish news media. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's (1992, 2010) critical discourse theory, this study sheds light on the social understanding of contemporary fact-checking.

All four studies share the same basic theoretical understanding of information practices as bundles of activities that journalists enact. In the first two articles, the practice concept is used as the principal theoretical lens, while articles III and IV complement it by approaching the topic of fact-checking from a genre and a discourse perspective respectively.

In the following section, the relationships between the theoretical concepts used in this thesis are described and discussed.

3.1. The theoretical framework

Five central theoretical concepts form the theoretical apparatus of this thesis:

- Information landscape
- Information practices
- Discourses
- Information infrastructure
- Genre

To visualize how these five concepts are connected to one another, a model (see Figure 1) has been developed:

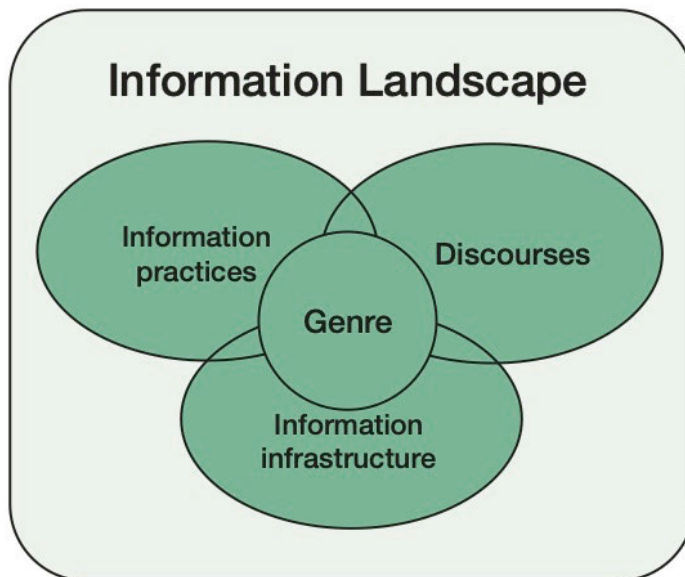


Figure 1. The relationships of the theoretical concepts.

As visualized by the model (Figure 1), this thesis theorizes how, in the information landscape of digital journalism, new genres—content moderation and fact-checking—are emerging, shaped, and constrained by the information practices, discourses, and information infrastructures that are acting in this landscape. Here, it is important to note that the five concepts do not constitute distinct empirical entities. Instead, they represent different analytical perspectives and ways of understanding content moderation and fact-checking.

From the perspective of this framework, the content moderation of news media comments sections and fact-checking are two particular kinds of information practices that journalists engage in. In this thesis, information practice is defined as a practice that consists of information-focused undertakings, such as searching for, using, sharing, and communicating information within a particular context (cf. Lloyd, 2010b; McKenzie, 2003a; Pilerot & Limberg, 2011). Information practices are understood as collective undertakings rather than cognitive processes (cf. McKenzie, 2003a; Talja et al., 2005); this means that they are understood to be social. They occur within a social setting and are engaged in by people who react and relate to one another and the performances of others in this setting (cf. Johannisson & Sundin, 2007; Schatzki, 2001, 2002, 2019).

Drawing on the earlier works of Cox (2012, 2013), Kemmis (2009), and Schatzki (2001, 2002), the theoretical apparatus of practice that underpins the investigation of how journalists and news media professionals position themselves in relation to managing user posts in online comments sections and fact-checking public claims is complemented by a variant of discourse theory that builds on the works of Fairclough (1992, 2010) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999).

A further theoretical point of departure of this thesis is the understanding of digital journalism as a social environment in which journalists enact the various practices of their profession. To theorize this environment, the concept of the information landscape (cf. Lloyd, 2006, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013) is used. This landscape is the setting where things happen, processes of change come about, and new practices—including content moderation and fact-checking—are formed and emerge. In this thesis, it is digital journalism that is conceptualized as an information landscape. Journalists who work in the information landscape of digital journalism are engaged in many different practices. Two of these practices are content moderation and fact-checking.

A reciprocal process is ongoing between the information landscape and the practices and discourses within it. How people talk about something, for example, fact-checking, influences how fact-checking is practiced. Likewise, how fact-checking is practiced influences how it is talked about (Lloyd, 2011). Furthermore, how fact-checking is talked about and practiced also influences the information landscape in which the discourses and practices occur. Just as practices and discourses have the power to constitute and shape the

information landscape, the landscape can constitute and shape practices and discourses (Lloyd, 2006). This means that digital journalism is shaped by how fact-checking is talked about and practiced, and that how it is talked about and practiced is also influenced by digital journalism. The fact that discourses and practices are conceptualized, in this thesis, as connected and intertwined implies that significant insight can be gained into both of them by analyzing them side by side. It is possible to understand practices by examining discourses and vice versa (cf. Johannisson & Sundin, 2007; Lloyd, 2005).

In an information landscape, information practices and their associated discourses are backed up by an assemblage of underpinning structures conceptualized, in this thesis, as information infrastructures. Information infrastructures function as an installed base for information practices and discourses within the information landscape in which they take place (cf. Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001; Shove et al., 2015; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). For example, many different actors engage in content moderation in a variety of ways. These various ways of engaging in the practice, and the various ways of understanding and talking about it, constitute and are linked together in a network situated within the landscape of digital journalism. In parallel to being backed up by existing and emerging information infrastructures, practices and discourses can also function as building blocks of information infrastructures. In other words, although it has material aspects, the information infrastructure is not understood as merely a simple physical backdrop. It also embraces practices and discourses that, when linked together, serve as a supporting structure for other practices and discourses.

Finally, the concept of genre (cf. Andersen, 2009; Miller, 1984) is applied to conceptualize typified bundles of practices, discourses, and information infrastructures emerging in response to new situations (cf. Miller, 1984). Supported by the information infrastructure, the practices and discourses produce genres that emerge as a result of changing practices, discourses, and information landscapes.

In this thesis, genres are practices and discourses materialized into specific forms of typification. Fact-checking, for example, is a genre when its components become typified ways of doing and saying. This thesis shows how fact-checkers around the world have adopted particular ways of responding to a situation in which the spread of misinformation is understood to be a problem. Such responses include the use of particular symbols that denote the outcome of a fact-check and the application of a simplified text structure when communicating the fact-checks.

In short, all these concepts provide glimpses into different aspects of content moderation and fact-checking. This means that the two undertakings can be understood by examining them from the perspective of any one of these concepts. However, it is also possible to scrutinize content moderation and fact-checking from the perspective of all these concepts together. In the

following sections, each of these concepts will be discussed and defined. Thereafter, a final section will summarize the theoretical framework.

3.2. Information landscape

This thesis applies the concept of information landscape (cf. Lloyd, 2006, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013) to refer to the social locus where practices and discourses are backed up by information infrastructures and where genres are produced. The theoretical presupposition of the thesis is that contemporary digital journalism forms an information landscape that constitutes the context in which journalists engage in diverse practices, including content moderation and fact-checking. In this sense, the information landscape is not just the location where certain practices occur; rather, it also enables and mediates a collective agreement about *how* and *why* things are done (Lloyd, 2006, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013). This does not mean that it is a neutral backdrop. Instead, it is in many ways a messy environment with complex constitutive power relations (Lloyd, 2011) and containing various opinions that must be negotiated against one another.

This is also true of digital journalism, which is shaped by social, historical, and material dimensions. It is a locus in which practices, discourses, and information infrastructures connect, overlap, and shape one another and their surrounding landscape in a reciprocal process.

The information landscape of digital journalism is also the space in which journalists interact with one another and with their audience. This space constitutes a kind of workplace but, more importantly, it constitutes something that is much broader than a particular place of work since it embraces various practices across multiple spaces.

As an information landscape, digital journalism has undergone considerable changes over the last few decades. Both content moderation and contemporary fact-checking constitute relatively new ways of doing things in the context of news media, and this thesis classifies them as information practices that are enacted within the information landscape of digital journalism.

The landscape gives meaning to the practices that people engage in and to the activities that constitute them (Lloyd, 2006). New practices emerge through people's ability to engage with and draw meaning from the landscape in their daily work (Lloyd, 2006). New members acquire the skills to engage in practices through training and through their inclusion in a community that can guide them toward mastering the information landscape. For example, new journalists would not only need to know how things are done in a technical sense to be able to successfully engage in the moderation of online comments sections. As shown in Article I, they would also need to know whether there are any particular policies that their news organizations apply

to user comments and, if so, why they do so. Furthermore, as the article suggests, it is necessary to be familiar with the appropriate rhetorical conventions and underlying discourses.

3.3. Information practices

The concept of practice as used here has also been inspired by the work of Schatzki (2001, 2002). However, while Schatzki has described practices as “bodily doings and sayings” (2002, p. 72), this thesis makes an analytical distinction between *doings* and *sayings*. The two are inseparable insofar as practices involve discursive elements and discourses are themselves expressions of practices. However, in this study, practices and discourses are perceived as distinctive theoretical concepts through which it is possible to shed light on different aspects of content moderation and fact-checking.

For this study, a reciprocal process is ongoing between practices and discourses, which, although they are so tightly interwoven that they are sometimes hard to distinguish, provide access to different aspects of content moderation and fact-checking. Practices are discursively formed (Kemmis, 2009), express normative features (Lloyd, 2012), and reflect normative understandings of their settings (cf. Couldry, 2012). They are shaped by social conventions and understandings (Cox, 2013), and they relate to human needs, i.e., they serve a purpose for those who engage in them. For example, for those who regard the spread of misinformation as a problem, there is a need to react, and it makes sense to take action and engage in fact-checking.

As practices, both content moderation and fact-checking are based on practical knowledge and an understanding of how things ought to be done (Cox, 2012), including technical knowledge of software, an ability to identify a user post as offensive, knowing how to respond to it, and a general understanding of the rules applying to participation in comments sections or the principles stipulated by, for example, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

According to Cox (2012, 2013), activities that serve to use, create, and seek information are intrinsic to all social practices. However, as content moderation and fact-checking are very explicitly about information—searching for information about the accounts of users who engage in comments sections, checking guidelines on user participation, informing users about these, or searching for background information about a claim that is being fact-checked—they are, without much controversy, easy to see as *information* practices. Like Pilerot and Limberg (2011), who define an information practice as “a bundle of overlapping and interconnected activities” (p. 329), this thesis understands content moderation and fact-checking as information-heavy bundles of overlapping and interconnected informational undertakings.

3.4. Discourses

There are different understandings of how to define and apply discourse as a theoretical concept. These different and sometimes conflicting understandings make discourse a somewhat challenging concept (Fairclough, 1992). Important in the context of this thesis, however, is the tenet that we use language to understand the world and to act in it in a way that makes sense and is meaningful to us (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1974). A crucial factor for understanding how and why people act is to understand the part that discourse plays as a communicative event in people's relationships with one another and the social world (Fairclough, 2010). We organize and reorganize life around language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Also, discourses work together with practices, and all practices have discursive connections whose symbolic elements are just as real as tangible ones (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

For Fairclough (1992), discourse refers to spoken or written language use, so Fairclough's (1992, 2010) critical discourse analysis has been used to identify and direct attention to the discursive facets of the information landscape in which practices emerge. Speaking, as a communicative event, also mediates how a speaker engages in and understands certain practices. Language not only reflects meaning but also produces it, and our choice of words, according to Fairclough (2010), reproduces specific ideologies. Article IV investigates the language used to phrase ideas about fact-checking in two major Swedish newspapers.

In parallel to using discourse analysis as a method to study the use of language related to fact-checking, the discourse-theoretical approach is used, in the broader context of this thesis, to direct attention to how language use shapes and is shaped by how content moderation and fact-checking are enacted by journalists and news media professionals. Discourses both represent and constitute social expressions and relations, and they produce new discourses on a historical continuum (Fairclough, 1992). They are manifestations of language and reflect shared ways of understanding things (Cox, 2012). According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), discourses have the power to influence both other discourses and non-discursive elements. Therefore, the discourses on fact-checking analyzed in Article IV are assumed to have the power to influence how fact-checking is practiced and vice versa.

Without attempting to reduce social life to a discourse (or practice), the analytical separation between practice and discourse highlights the importance of discourses (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) and non-discursive doings, respectively, to the way social life is constructed. The overarching rationale for singling out discourse as a distinct analytical concept is to direct attention to shared discourses, which are equally relevant to the ways in which content moderation and fact-checking are understood.

3.5. Information infrastructures

This thesis employs information infrastructure as a theoretical concept to frame the all-encompassing structure that consists of technological tools and systems (cf. Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001; Star & Ruhleder, 1996), people (cf. Simone, 2004), and other elements of the installed base (cf. Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001) in an information landscape. Shove et al. (2015) list four key features that distinguish an infrastructure. First, infrastructures are usually connective and link places and people. Second, infrastructures often support a variety of practices simultaneously. Third, infrastructures are typically collective and serve more than one actor or community. Finally, infrastructures are often, but not always, fairly obdurate. Furthermore, the authors noted that infrastructures “embody and carry historically specific ideas about normal and appropriate ways of living” (Shove et al., 2015, p. 280), and this is also relevant in the context of this thesis. An infrastructure provides scaffolding for what people say and do. It ties practices and discourses that occur within, for example, news outlets’ comments sections to the information landscape in which they take place.

Ksiazek and Springer (2020) noted that news outlets provide the technical and organizational infrastructure for comments sections. However, as shown in Article II, the information infrastructures that underpin comments sections can be understood in much broader terms. The information infrastructures that support digital journalism encompass the news outlets that maintain comments sections and the technical tools used to maintain them as well as the artificial intelligence and algorithms increasingly used for content moderation. However, it does not end there. The installed base of content moderation and fact-checking also comprises multiple social configurations ranging from policies and norms to shared understandings. Moreover, an information infrastructure that underpins practices and discourses can itself incorporate other practices and discourses as its building blocks. The different ways of practicing, for example, content moderation and the different ways of talking about it can become incorporated as scaffolding to support new practices and understandings as they emerge. Such information infrastructures, in other words, are characterizable as open networks (cf. Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001) in that their limits are not carved in stone. Similarly, they are embedded in other (infra)structures, such as the Internet (Star & Bowker, 2010; Star & Ruhleder, 1996), and in other social arrangements, such as those inherent in the social context of journalism.

The openness of the information infrastructures studied here also means that they are heterogeneous in that they involve a whole range of elements and are linked to manifold ways of practicing and understanding the undertakings of content moderation and fact-checking. They spread far beyond individual news outlets and incorporate external actors within their infrastructures, actors such as the company Interaktiv Säkerhet (Interactive Security), which is hired

by some of the studied news outlets to perform content moderation. Other examples are hashtagging and the involvement of non-profit organizations such as #JagÄrHär (#IAmHere), which was founded in 2016 by the Swedish journalist Mina Dennert.

Finally, as with the practices and discourses linked with their supporting information infrastructures and the information landscape in which they are set, it is important to stress that information infrastructures are not neutral (cf. Star & Ruhleder, 1996). They convey specific understandings of how content moderation and fact-checking ought to be carried out. This aspect of information infrastructure is especially worthwhile to consider when information practices, discourses, and information infrastructures are brought together and typified genres emerge.

3.6. Genre as typified rhetorical action

Especially in literary research, the concept of genre has traditionally been connected to text and speech categorizations. However, the more recent rhetorical genre approach, developed in the 1980s by Miller (1984) and her colleagues, applies a different perspective to the concept of genre. The approach highlights the social processes through which genres emerge and become acknowledged (Feinberg, 2015). When referring to genres, this thesis draws on Miller's (1984) theoretical approach, which defines genre as a rhetorical situation of social action. This means that genre is more than merely a category that, for example, labels a group of texts with certain shared traits or features.

In this thesis, how journalists conduct and organize the practices of content moderation and fact-checking is understood to accomplish an end result. Content moderation and fact-checking are theorized as typified rhetorical actions (Miller, 1984) that occur in response to how users behave in online comments sections and to the spreading of misinformation, particularly, but not exclusively, the spreading of misinformation online.

Although all practices, including information practices, are concerned with the regularity of the actions (Couldry, 2003) that people engage in to produce forms of social life, this thesis analytically distinguishes between the usual regularity of practices and the conventionalized forms of typified actions that they can take.

According to Andersen (2015a), a genre works through "typification and exhibits its habits of discourse" (p. 28), and, as argued by Miller (1984), this occurs as a result of people recognizing and acting upon a recurrent situation. Miller (1984) observed that human action is guided by meaning and that a process of interpretation and meaning-making is central to how people respond to a certain situation. A genre "fuses situational with formal and

substantive features” (Miller, 1984, p. 155) into something new. What is new is made familiar through a process of typification.

Miller (1984) also argued that genre represents action, which involves both situation and motive. In the context of this thesis, genre is, unlike practice, a particular kind of conventionalized action that only occurs in reaction to a particular situation and encompasses both substance and form by incorporating practice, discourse, and infrastructure in a typified bundle. In this thesis, examples of both substance and form have been provided in Article III. In this article, fact-checking is conceptualized as an emerging genre, justified by the fact that misinformation is understood to be a problem. As shown in the article, fact-checkers enact typified forms of action such as rating systems with colorful symbols and simple text structures to respond to the perceived threat of misinformation. This means that the symbols included in rating systems, fact-checking practices, how text is organized, and how language is used by fact-checkers are understood as forms of action. Together they also constitute a genre, i.e., a rhetorical response to the spread of misinformation.

Just as Andersen (2015a) understood the knowledge organization genre as a means rather than an end, this study has theorized fact-checking as a means to combat the perceived problem of misinformation. A genre emerges in response to social and institutional arrangements that “produce forms of action guided by the particular interests and ideologies of these arrangements” (Andersen, 2015b, p. 4). This is just as true for the moderation of content in online comments sections as it is for fact-checking.

3.7. Summary of the theoretical apparatus and overview of the conceptual relationships

The theoretical framework of this thesis knits together the five concepts of information landscape, information practice, discourse, information infrastructure, and genre. Before providing an overview of these concepts' reciprocal relationships (see Table 2), this section briefly summarizes the theoretical apparatus of the thesis.

In this thesis, an *information infrastructure* is conceptualized as an underlying structure that supports and holds together *practices* and *discourses*. This underlying structure links various practices and discourses within the *information landscape* while also tying them to the landscape. *Genres* are conventionalized and typified forms of practice-discourse-infrastructure bundles.

In the empirical context of this study, both content moderation and fact-checking are practices intertwined with sets of associated discourses and infrastructures. Content moderation and fact-checking are also understood to constitute their respective genres, which have emerged as conventionalized rhetorical responses to the need to address a certain kind of online user interaction and the spreading of misinformation.

As a whole, this conceptual apparatus provides a theoretical framework for the thesis that helps to explore the emergence and constituents of the content moderation of news media comments sections and fact-checking as prominent information practices in the contemporary news media landscape.

Table 2. Theoretical concepts.

Key concept	Explanation	Key references
Information landscape	A context or setting in which journalists act. In this thesis, the information landscape corresponds to digital journalism. The information landscape shapes and is shaped by what is going on within it.	Lloyd (2006, 2010a, 2011, 2017b), Lloyd et al. (2013)
Information practices	The studied information practices that journalists engage in are enacted within the information landscape of digital journalism. In this thesis, the studied practices are content moderation and fact-checking.	Lloyd (2012), Kemmis (2009), Schatzki (2001, 2002), Cox (2012, 2013)
Discourses	Just as practices occur within the information landscape, discourses also act within it. The discourses are interwoven with the practices and vice versa. Discourses and practices shape one another reciprocally.	Fairclough (1992, 2010), Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999)
Information infra-structures	An information infrastructure provides a supporting structure for the practices and discourses. It holds them together and ties them to the information landscape in which they occur. In their capacity of supporting practices and discourses, information infrastructures also help produce genres.	Star and Ruhleder (1996), Star and Bowker (2010), Hanseth and Lundberg (2001), Shove et al. (2015)
Genres	With the help of information infrastructures, practices and discourses produce genres that provide them with conventionalized form. Genres are typified forms of action and rhetorical response to a specific situation, i.e., the problem of users misbehaving in comment sections and the spread of misinformation.	Miller (1984), Andersen (2009, 2015b), Feinberg (2015)

4. Methods and material

In this chapter, the methods applied will be described and discussed in the context of this research project. In the subsequent sections, the empirical material on which the findings of this thesis are based will be reviewed and the choices underlying the data selection will be accounted for. The methodological limitations will also be discussed, as will the essential ethical considerations addressed.

- I. Juneström, A. (2019). Emerging practices for managing user misconduct in online news media comments sections. *Journal of Documentation*, 75(4), 694–708. [**Peer-reviewed journal article**]
- II. Juneström, A. (2019). Online user misconduct and an evolving infrastructure of practices: A practice-based study of information infrastructure and social practices. *Information Research*, 24(1), <http://informationr.net/ir/24-1/isic2018/isic1825.html>. [**Peer-reviewed conference paper**]
- III. Juneström, A. (2020). An emerging genre of contemporary fact-checking. *Journal of Documentation*, 77(2), 501–517. [**Peer-reviewed journal article**]
- IV. Juneström, A. (2022). Discourses of fact-checking in Swedish news media. *Journal of Documentation*, 78(7), 125–140. [**Peer-reviewed journal article**]

Two of the studies in the thesis focus on journalists' engagement with the content moderation of news media comments sections and two studies explore contemporary fact-checking. Of the four studies contained in the thesis, three are peer-reviewed journal articles and one is a published peer-reviewed conference paper.

4.1. The methodological framework

This thesis is about the journalistic practices of content moderation and fact-checking. Practices occur within an information landscape (cf. Longhofer et al., 2012). As this thesis focuses on journalists' perceptions, understandings, and experiences of practices rather than on the practices themselves, qualitative methods have been favored in both the data collection and the analyses. Although theory helps explain the results of a study, as Longhofer et al. (2012) noted, it is through the research design that the aims are achieved. The methods applied in this thesis have been set up with the aim of understanding the qualities and meaning-making properties (cf. Longhofer et al., 2012) of content moderation and fact-checking. Therefore, to answer the research questions, multiple qualitative methodological approaches have been applied for collecting and analyzing the material. This thesis uses a mix of methods that "blends present-time (in-vivo) and after-the-fact (retrospective) strategies" (Longhofer et al., 2012, p. 42) for collecting data.

Three key methods have been applied to collect data. Article I investigates how journalists experience the content moderation of comments sections by examining the journalists' own narratives. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data about journalists' experiences and perceptions of their work with comments sections and content moderation. Article II also examines journalists' narratives, but this time to find out how practices for responding to users in comments sections interconnect and overlap. The findings of this study are based on the same empirical interview material from which the first study's findings are drawn.

Article III explores how journalists make visible and communicate their fact-checking work on their websites. In this study, sample articles and website features were extracted from the websites of three famous fact-checking organizations for the purpose of analyzing how they communicate the results of their fact-checks. Both textual and graphic material were collected and analyzed thematically (cf. V. Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify descriptive patterns on the websites. Article IV investigates how fact-checking is discursively constructed in newspapers; selected textual sources were sampled and a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2010) was conducted for this purpose.

Table 3. Overview of data collection and analysis methods.

Methods for collecting data:	Material	Methods for analyzing data:	Used in articles:
Semi-structured interviews in the spring and fall of 2017	Ten interviews with journalists and media professionals from nine news outlets in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada (listed in section 4.2.1)	Content analysis of interview transcripts	I, II
Extraction of elements from three websites during two five-day periods (March 18–23 and September 22–28, 2020)	Two sets of data from the following websites: www.snopes.com www.factcheck.org www.politifact.com	Qualitative content analysis of website elements	III
Sampling of articles published in two Swedish newspapers between January 1 2014 and December 15, 2020	130 texts from two Swedish national morning newspapers: <i>Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)</i> and <i>Dagens Nyheter (DN)</i>	Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of newspaper articles	IV

Table 3 summarizes the three datasets collected and analyzed in the thesis, including data collection and analysis methods and the articles (I–IV) in which the data and methods were used.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

In this section, the strategies used for collecting and analyzing data will be described in chronological order. Initially, the methods for collecting and analyzing the data used in the first two interview studies (articles I and II) will be reviewed in one section. After that, the methods used in articles III and IV will be accounted for in two individual sections.

4.2.1. Interview studies (articles I and II)

The first two articles, which focus on the content moderation of news media comments sections, draw their findings from the same empirical material, i.e., interview data. For these studies, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven journalists and news media professionals from nine news organizations in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada.

Discussed in the interviews were the journalists' experiences and perceptions of the practices they engaged in and their impressions of the role of other actors also engaged in various forms of content moderation. The journalists' narratives of their experiences were particularly important in Article I, while their impressions of other actors' practices for engaging with user-generated content in comments sections were more important in Article II as this article explored how practices are connected via infrastructure to one another.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven representatives of the following nine news outlets for the first and second studies of this thesis:

- **Sveriges Television (SVT)**, the Swedish national public-service television company
- **Sveriges Radio (SR)**, the Swedish national radio company
- **Dagens Nyheter (DN)**, a major Swedish national newspaper
- **Sydsvenska Dagbladet**, a major local Swedish newspaper
- **Danmarks Radio (DR)**, the Danish national public-service radio and television company
- **Tagesschau**, the major German news program from the public-service broadcaster ARD
- **Spiegel Online (SPON)** from SPIEGELnet, a major German magazine and news website
- **VOCM of St John's**, a local Canadian radio station
- **The London Free Press**, a local Canadian morning newspaper

In the interviews, one journalist from each news outlet was interviewed, with two exceptions. At one of the news outlets, two separate interviews were conducted with different staff members, and at another outlet, one interview

was conducted with two participants simultaneously. All the interviews were conducted in the spring and fall of 2017. Nine of the interviews were conducted face to face and one was conducted via Skype. The interviews lasted 30–50 minutes.

The material covered two Swedish (SVT and SR), one Danish (DR), and one German (Tagesschau) public-service outlet. The first two are Swedish public-service television and radio broadcasting companies, the third is the Danish public-service radio broadcasting company, and the fourth, Tagesschau, is a news service of the German public-service broadcaster ARD. Furthermore, the material covered two Swedish morning newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and the German news website and magazine *Spiegel Online* (SPON). These are not public-service media outlets but are nevertheless highly respected and generally considered to be high-quality news providers. *DN* and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* are two major Swedish morning newspapers. *SPON* is one of the news sites reaching the highest numbers of readers in Germany (Jacobs, 2014). *SPON* was also one of the first magazines “worldwide to go online in the 1990s” (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020, p. 24), and its long web presence was considered an advantage when selecting material.

The material covers three local news providers. The newspaper *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, although local in its association with the south of Sweden, is among the major Swedish morning newspapers. Although comparatively small in its own national context, the Canadian local radio station VOCM of St John’s and the newspaper *The London Free Press* were included in the material so as to widen the geographical spread of the news outlets included in the studies.

There were two main reasons for conducting interviews in multiple countries. First, an international sample selection permits the observation of whether there are significant variations between how content moderation is conducted in different countries. Although the intent was never to conduct a comparative study of different national approaches, it was still considered an advantage to keep the study open to any such comparative findings. Second, a purely practical consideration guided the choice of news outlets. As the more limited selection of major news sources within a small national framework like Sweden’s would have made it more difficult to collect enough data, a cross-national selection of news organizations was considered an advantage. Therefore, the point of departure when selecting news outlets was to have some geographical spread in the material but still limit the selection to outlets within Western representative democracies.

The news outlets were approached via either email or telephone during the material selection period. Most of the European news outlets that were contacted responded swiftly and consented to giving interviews. Only one German and one Danish newspaper that were contacted did not respond to the inquiry and were therefore not included in the material. However, in Canada it was more difficult to find candidates to interview, and multiple news outlets

were contacted but did not reply. In the end, the contacts with the two Canadian news outlets that consented to give interviews were facilitated by members of the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario (Western University) in London, Canada, where the author spent a research semester in the fall of 2017.

The individual participants were selected by the news outlets that had been contacted. The news outlets either provided the author with the contact information of employees considered suitable to answer questions or forwarded the request to an employee who then got in touch with the author. Only in the case of the two Canadian new outlets was the author provided with contact information for specific journalists at the news outlets from external sources, i.e., colleagues from the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. These participants were then contacted and consented to giving interviews.

Before any interviews were conducted, an interview guide with a set of questions had been prepared to keep the interviews on track (Dalen, 2007; Wilson, 2012). Before each interview, the interview guide was modified to fit each situation.

The questions had been constructed to encourage the participants to talk as freely as possible. The guide included a set of questions intended to encourage the participants to express their thoughts on comments sections and content moderation in a relaxed and flexible way. Simple yes–no questions were avoided in favor of open questions that encouraged them to describe various situations, work processes, and experiences with their audiences (Lantz, 2013; J. Larsson & Holmström, 2007). In the interviews, participants could, for example, be asked to describe particularly challenging situations that they had encountered when moderating comments sections. The participants were also asked about their experience of users whom they considered to have behaved in offensive ways in the comments sections and about the actions that they took when responding to such user engagement. Specific questions about their own work practices were mixed with general questions about the particular news outlet's policy regarding user interactivity in comments sections. Of particular interest in the interviews was the participants' experience of how the work with comments sections had changed in the time that they had been engaged in it. The participants' ideas for improvement were also discussed, as was how they thought the kind of interaction occurring in comments sections ought to play out. The interviewees were also asked about other actors' engagement in the comments section, for example, the services provided by hired content moderators.

At the beginning of all interviews, to make the interviewees more comfortable with the interview situation (cf. Dalen, 2007; Galletta & Cross, 2013), the participants were always asked to introduce themselves by giving some background information about themselves. At the end of every interview, all interviewees were asked if they could think of anything important to add that they thought had been omitted during the interview. In

between, questions were asked about the participants' work practices and the news organizations' web presence, maintenance of comments sections, and policies for comments sections. In the interviews, special attention was paid to the time when the news outlet had moved its comments sections from its own website to social media, if the participant had been employed there when this happened. Not all the news outlets had stopped maintaining comments sections on their own websites and some of them were, at the time of the interview, preparing to reintroduce them. However, all the news outlets were maintaining the practice of letting users comment on news articles they posted on Facebook. Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, was discussed quite extensively. However, the interview guide was intended to be flexible (cf. Wilson, 2012), and if a participant wanted to follow a different line of discussion than the one outlined in the guide, the interview followed the participant's line.

The semi-structured interview was considered an advantageous format as the aim was to collect in-depth information about the interviewees' perceptions of work practices, rather than to find out about the specific routines that these practices included (cf. Galletta & Cross, 2013). As the format also allows participants to expand on issues that matter to them, it prevents simplistic explanations of why things are done in certain ways. To learn about how an individual feels about something, narratives with concrete examples of work situations are considered useful (J. Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Although the transcriptions were verbatim, the quoted sections underwent some editing to adjust for linguistic disfluencies that could make them hard to read. For example, fillers, non-lexical vocables, and other superfluous sounds were sometimes edited out as these were not considered relevant to the analytical process (cf. Bailey, 2008).

The analysis was conducted through repeated reading of the transcribed interviews. The analytical process was identical in both studies and corresponds to Braun and Clark's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis, which aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns, i.e., themes, within the dataset. This method for analyzing the data was used because the themes present in the data are understood to capture "something important in relation to the research question" (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

The analytical process was conducted stepwise. First, the interviews were transcribed, as mentioned above, in a stage of the analytical process that corresponds to the first phase of Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step analysis. In this phase, the author made herself familiar with the data. Through rereading the transcriptions, adjustments were made and initial patterns were noted. This means that the transcription also involved a certain amount of interpretation (cf. Bird, 2005). While analyzing interview transcripts for the purpose of identifying themes, as was the case in this process, it is of course important to recall that the researcher cannot entirely free herself of the

theoretical commitments of her research (cf. V. Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings, i.e., the themes, are grounded on the researcher's own interpretations.

Following the transcription stage was the coding of recurrent features in the data. Different extracts were highlighted in different colors. Different features were collated and organized into groups corresponding to different sets of activities that the participants mentioned. Each such group corresponded to a different theme. These defined themes were then reviewed and labeled according to the activities that they captured, for example, "handling the challenges of providing users with a space in which to be heard" and "negotiating the benefits of maintaining digital platforms for user interaction" (Article I).

4.2.2. Web content analysis (Article III)

Article III investigates the practice of fact-checking by applying the rhetorical concept of genre and analyzing content from three well-known American fact-checking organizations' websites. Two sets of content from the websites were examined. The first set contained a snapshot of COVID-19 coverage published on the fact-checkers' websites during one five-day period in March 2020, while the second was from a five-day period six months later. Screenshots were taken from the websites each day during the two periods, and the analysis included both textual and graphic content from the websites.

For this study, three well-known fact-checking organizations based in the USA were selected for closer scrutiny. Although it started as a reference site for urban legends and not as the fact-checker we know today, Snopes is the oldest of the three organizations. It was founded in 1995 and has developed into one of the most-consulted contemporary fact-checkers (Graves, 2016). Today, Snopes is owned by Snopes Media Group and is by far the most visited of the three websites (Graves, 2016). With a history outside of journalism, it is not rooted in the news media in the same way as the other two organizations included in this study. PolitiFact was created in 2007 as a fact-checking project by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and it had close ties to the *Tampa Bay Times* newspaper in Florida. The third and final fact-checker, FactCheck, is also closely connected to journalism. It was founded in 2003 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

All three fact-checking organizations selected for this project have already been extensively investigated by scholars (eg., Graves, 2016, 2017; Kim et al., 2021; Marietta et al., 2015; Mena, 2019; Ng & Carley, 2021), although not in terms of information genres. However, in their capacity as leading fact-checking initiatives that are internationally well known, they are assumed to have influenced how other emerging fact-checkers work. Selecting these three organizations was therefore considered an advantage. In this research project, the focus is not so much on the particular fact-checkers per se; instead, it is on

the information practices that have emerged through their work and how the fact-checkers reproduce them.

For the analysis, content from the three organizations' websites was harvested during two five-day periods. Data were collected from the websites once a day between March 18 and 23 and September 22 and 28, 2020. This means that the first period of data selection was at an early stage of the pandemic, while the second was six months later when the fact-checkers could have been expected to have adjusted their coverage to the situation.

Although the focus of the data collection was specific posts and fact-checks relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, the material also included other elements from the websites, such as graphic elements (e.g., symbols and other web features) (cf. Ihlström & Henfridsson, 2005). The screenshots taken from the websites were organized into categories according to thematic similarities identified in the material. The analytical process, which was inspired by Kolb's (2012) constant comparative method, also involved some comparison of the three websites (cf. Hellspång, 2001). In particular, it is Kolb's (2012) three-level coding process that inspired the method for analyzing this dataset. During the first phase, which involved open coding, data were compared and questions about what was and was not understood were asked; different properties and categories were identified within the data. During the second phase, "the axial coding phase," connections were made between properties and web features were related to categories in a more systematic way. Finally, in the third phase of selective coding, the category identification was completed and relationships between these categories were assessed. As shown in Article III, this process resulted in three core categories or themes labeled *access*, *trust*, and *information poverty*. Also, as discussed in the article, some overlapping of the categories was identified through the analysis.

4.2.3. Discourse analysis (Article IV)

The method applied in the final study was inspired by Norman Fairclough's (2010) discourse approach. A total of 130 news articles that covered the topic of fact-checking and were published in either of two major Swedish national morning newspapers between January 1, 2014 and December 15, 2020 were identified using keyword searches and analyzed using critical discourse analysis.

Dagens Nyheter (DN) and *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)* were selected as data sources for the fourth study because of their reach. These two newspapers are among the major national morning newspapers in Sweden and could be expected to express discourses that are reasonably mainstream. According to how the political strands are understood in Sweden, *DN* is considered a liberal newspaper and *SvD* a conservative one.

In preparation for the data collection, different keywords for searching the National Library of Sweden's newspaper database Svenska dagstidningar

(SDT) were trialed. The keywords used corresponded to various Swedish terms for fact-checking. The purpose of this trial was to gain an overview of when the different terms started to appear in the Swedish news media and when they occurred most often. Words searched for in this database were the noun *faktakoll* (fact-check), the verbs *faktakolla* and *faktagranska* (to fact-check), and the noun *faktagranskning* (fact-checking).

The last of these terms appeared for the first time in a newspaper in 1967; however, after that, it only appeared a few times in the years leading up to the 2010s. In 2013, however, the usage of the term increased suddenly to thirteen times; it then continued to appear with increasing frequency in the years that followed until its usage spiked in 2018. In that year, which was an election year in Sweden, the word appeared 504 times in Swedish newspapers. The incidence of the other keywords followed similar temporal patterns. However, as *faktagranskning* yielded the most hits, it was considered sufficient for sampling an adequate amount of material for the analysis; all other synonyms and quasi-synonyms were therefore left out.

The first step in the data collection process was to download all the articles from *DN* and *SvD* in which the keyword *faktagranskning* appeared and that were published between January 1, 2014, the year when the term started to appear in the two newspapers, and December 15, 2020, which was the date on which the data collection took place.

The harvested newspaper articles represented various journalistic textual genres and included opinion pieces, news reports, fact-checks, and book reviews. As the word sometimes appeared in passing in articles that did not actually relate to the topic of fact-checking at all, the second step was to review the downloaded material and remove all texts that were not relevant to the analysis. Through this process, 130 articles were selected for in-depth analysis; of these articles, 66 were published in *DN* and 64 in *SvD*.

When analyzing the texts, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to examine the linguistic structures and qualities characterizing the texts (Fairclough, 1992, 2010). CDA is a qualitative approach to identifying discursive structures in textual material. As a method, it is closely linked to certain theoretical standpoints (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000) that have already been presented in the theory chapter. In other words, it includes both methodological and theoretical elements and it is impossible to separate method and theory in this case (Fairclough, 1992, 2010).

In accordance with Fairclough's approach, the texts were scrutinized according to a three-dimensional model. The first dimension is the textual dimension. This dimension considers the role of words, sentences, and other elements that make up a text. The second dimension is called the practice dimension and has a wider scope. This dimension considers processes that include practices such as news consumption, distribution, and the production of news articles. The third dimension involves consideration of the effects of the identified discourses. While the fourth study focuses on relating the

identified discourses to previous research (Fairclough, 2010), the final discussion in the thesis reflects on the connections between the implications of the discourses in light of the entire research project.

4.3. The methodological process: pros and cons

All methodological choices involve limitations that need to be considered. In the case of this thesis, a few issues regarding the material selection and the subsequent analyses of this material must be addressed.

One concern in relation to the selection and handling of the material has to do with language. Some of the interviews for the first and second studies were conducted in Swedish, one was conducted in a Scandinavian mix involving both Swedish and Danish, two were conducted in German, and two in English. Although the author is proficient in these languages, only Swedish is her native language. Conducting interviews in foreign languages always involves an increased risk of misunderstanding. Being aware of and watchful for possible misunderstandings caused by language were important both during the interviews and in the transcription process.

Language also presented a challenge when translating quotations into English from those interviews that were not conducted in this language. The translation process involved the possibility of misquoting interview participants and not conveying their intended meanings in an accurate way. Therefore, great care was put into ensuring that the quoted sections of the transcripts were translated as faithfully as possible.

The risk of misrepresenting an intended meaning by improper translation was also relevant when translating passages from the Swedish newspaper articles that served as the empirical material for the fourth study. As this translation also involved a balancing act between retaining a passage's stylistic and lexical form and communicating the message contained within the passages as accurately as possible, the author invested much time and care in the translation.

Another limiting aspect relevant to the thesis is the material representation of the immaterial structures of discourses and information infrastructures. When identifying and talking about a discourse, the fluidity of its nature tends to become less clear, and it takes on a much more material form than it actually has. Especially in the study that applies discourse analysis as its main method, the interpretative nature of the findings was therefore emphasized. Also, the form of information infrastructure represented in this thesis is much more immaterial than the kind of material and technological structures that often come to mind when the word "infrastructure" is used. However, when talking about information infrastructures as immaterial structures, they tend to take shape and may appear much more material than they actually are.

Finally, as the results presented here draw on a relatively small material selection, it is important to address the problems associated with qualitative research sampling (Oppong, 2013). First, it is essential to be aware of the interpretative nature of qualitative research. In the words of Masny (2016), “to interpret is to judge” (p. 667). This means that interpretation and representation overlap. In this thesis, only a small subset of fact-checking organizations and journalists working with content moderation was selected for data collection, which makes generalizations difficult. However, although the small sample used here is limiting when it comes to making generalizations, it is considered adequate for the stated research problem of this thesis.

4.4. Ethical considerations

As this thesis bases its findings on datasets that include human subjects as interviewees, authors of texts, and creators of websites, considering the ethical aspects of the research process is imperative. Handling the voices that constitute the data respectfully (Samaroo et al., 2013) is just as important as recalling that “data are not objective, impartial, or transparent accounts of reality” (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020, p. 1).

In this thesis, multiple ethical issues were considered. The first most obvious concern relates to the interview situations and the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research project.

When planning and conducting the interviews and when handling the data generated during them, the guidelines established by Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council) were considered (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The participation of all interviewed journalists was entirely voluntary, their participation was anonymous, and they could always withdraw from the study should they wish to do so.

In the cases when no reply was received upon first approaching a news outlet to ask for an interview, only one more contact attempt was made. If no reply was received this time, no further attempt was made as the lack of an answer was considered a rejection of the invitation to participate in the study.

Upon establishing the first contact, the future interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interviews. This included informing them that the interviews would be conducted within the context of information studies. Because the period that passed between establishing contact and the actual interview entailed the possibility that the interviewees might forget this information, they were again informed of the purpose of the study at the start of the actual interview. Every interviewee was aware of and agreed to the recording of their interview, and they all gave their verbal consent at the beginning of each interview.

As the interviewed journalists did not express their views as individual experts but rather as individuals representing a larger group of people, revealing the identities of the interviewees was not considered pertinent to the purpose of this study and all participants have been anonymized. Anonymity also has the advantage of protecting the integrity of the interviewees (Saunders et al., 2015). However, to make the research process as transparent as possible, the author obtained the interviewees' consent to revealing the identities of the news providers for which they worked. Nonetheless, all connections between the interviewees' statements and their individual news provider employers were removed when quoting the interviewees in the studies. Any other personal information, for example, the names of colleagues mentioned in the interviews, was also anonymized in the transcripts and the articles.

Other ethical considerations concern the presentation of the data on which this research bases its findings. The author has endeavored to communicate interview participants' narratives, website elements, and content from newspaper articles as accurately and respectfully as possible.

5. Study summaries

This chapter presents summaries of the four studies that make up this thesis. Three of the four studies have been published as academic articles in the *Journal of Documentation*. One study, a longer conference paper that was presented at the ISIC conference in 2018, has been published in the journal *Information Research*.

5.1. Study I

The first study explores how journalists relate to their daily work of managing user-generated content online. The purpose of the study is to build knowledge of how the practices involved in moderating comments sections are perceived by those who engage in them. The focus of the analysis is on how journalists understand this work to have evolved over the years when their news media organizations provided comments sections for readers and on how they experience work tasks that expose them to users who sometimes act aggressively or offensively online.

The study uses a practice-theoretical approach to reveal how journalists make sense of the work activities that they engage in when dealing with users online. In the study, this approach helps in investigating the roles that the work environment and the norms, values, and rules embedded in it play in how these activities are constructed. In other words, the variant of practice theory applied here takes an explicit environmental approach influenced by Lloyd's (2006, 2011, 2017b) information landscape concept. This concept helps explain how journalists rely on authorized and discursive practices within their field when engaging in the management of sometimes aggressive user-generated content and finding new ways to respond to comments and posts made by users.

Ten semi-structured interviews with journalists from nine news organizations in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada were conducted for this study in the spring and fall of 2017. The interviewees were asked about their work with comments sections in general and about the activities they engage in to respond to and counteract user misconduct in particular. The user participation strategies that the interviewees' news media organizations generally applied were discussed; the interviewees were also asked about how

these strategies had evolved over the years during which they had been engaged in such activities.

The analysis led to the identification of four key themes or topics that recurred in the interviews. The first theme concerns the journalists' narratives of the general challenges that they had experienced as part of the practice of providing a space where users could be heard. The second concerns how the journalists negotiate the benefits of maintaining platforms for user interaction such as comments sections, despite the extra work that these involve. The third theme is constituted by the interviewees' narratives of their work managing specific posts that they perceive to be antagonistic. Finally, the fourth theme includes narratives of the handling of specific users who fail to adhere to expected rules of general participation.

The journalists' narratives of their experiences working with comments sections illustrate an ongoing balancing act between thwarting user misconduct, on the one hand, and staying true to the journalistic values and traditions to which they are committed, on the other. The argument that the journalists make in favor of the practice of giving users a space where they can participate and discuss news, despite the problems that it sometimes gives rise to, involves negotiation between different democratic and journalistic principles. The important democratic ideals of free speech that the journalists feel they are maintaining by giving users a participatory platform are negotiated with journalistic principles of objectivity and quality that are sometimes challenged by the user-generated content in the comments sections.

The study addresses the importance of norms, values, and emotions to the way practices for handling user-generated content online in general, and comments sections in particular, are shaped. The information landscape of news media practices is inextricably tied to the environment in which they play out. The moral values, traditions, and collective experiences that are representative of the journalistic environment condition how journalists engage in, for example, the content moderation of comments sections. The study shows that the practices for managing the problems perceived to have arisen with the adoption of new technological tools emerge through the reciprocal process of developing new practices for dealing with problems while also reinventing and adjusting the values, norms, and traditional ways of understanding the relationship between users and the news media.

5.2. Study II

The second study explores an information infrastructure that has evolved around the issue of dealing with online misconduct in news media comments sections on social media. The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of how different practices for addressing online user misconduct in comments sections are interconnected in a heterogenous online media structure.

While news media outlets engage in the interactive practice of posting links to news articles on Facebook and give their readers the opportunity to use the comments sections below these articles to discuss their content, this interaction involves not only the specific news outlets posting the articles and their readers. This study shows that several different actors are engaged in the interactions that occur in comments sections for the specific purpose of counteracting their sometimes-toxic climate.

In the study, the concept of information infrastructure, a structure that is usually understood to consist of tools and agents, is applied (cf. Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001; Shove et al., 2012; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). However, instead of material entities, the study conceptualizes different practices for combating online misconduct as the building blocks of the information infrastructure. In addition, the study applies a variant of practice theory inspired by Schatzki's (2002) understanding of the social setting as a context in which people interact with one another and with the technical tools that they apply in their actions. The theoretical notion of an information infrastructure as a structure that merges various practices and gives them the capacity to exert influence (Blue & Spurling, 2017) is seen as something that can bring about socio-technical change.

The empirical material for this study comprises the same ten interviews that were conducted with representatives of nine news organizations in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada in 2017 and that also provided data for the first study of this thesis.

In the analysis, the infrastructural connection between five practices is examined. The first practice is represented by the news media's provision of online comments sections where users can meet and discuss news. The second is the content moderation that the news media conducts in these comments sections. The third practice is engaging in hashtagging as a way of raising awareness of content that is considered inflammatory. In the context of this study, the practice is engaged in by members of the organization #JagÄrHär (#IAmHere). Whenever the members of this organization come across a post that they consider offensive, they react by hashtagging it. The fourth practice is the content moderation conducted by an actor other than the news outlet. In the context of this study, that actor is represented by the private company Interaktiv Säkerhet (Interactive Security), to which some of the news outlets in this study have outsourced the content moderation of their comments

sections. Although not all the news outlets in the study engaged the services of external companies such as this one, they all had to relate to the fact that such services were available as an option to handle the user-generated content produced in the comments sections linked to their news articles. The fifth and final practice comprises the activities engaged in by regular users who participate in the discussions that occur in comments sections and whose actions can help uphold a civil tone. The interviewees testified that how the regular users respond to sometimes-vitriolic posts is essential to how the discussions play out and that they influence the amount of content moderation needed.

These five practices comprise sets of fundamentally different activities. For example, conducting content moderation by removing offensive posts has little in common with the practice of hashtagging as a way to raise awareness of a post's offensive content. Also, the two organizations Interaktiv Säkerhet and #JagÄrHär have little in common, and they are motivated by completely different factors. However, despite their differences, they have both emerged in reaction to the fact that discussions occur in online comments sections and that the comments that users post in these sections are sometimes perceived as offensive. In that respect, their practices meet and overlap in an online information infrastructure that is constantly changing. The organization #JagÄrHär did not have to invent hashtagging to use it for this purpose. Instead, it was the practice of hashtagging that enabled #JagÄrHär to work toward inspiring less vitriolic online discussions. These practices, as well as the structures with which they are interwoven, are products of socio-technical actions (Henfridsson & Bygstad, 2013) that occur in relation to the contemporary practices of news production and consumption.

The study concludes that the practices the different actors engage in intertwine and overlap in an immaterial structure. Rather than change coming about through a network of actors (cf. Law, 1999), it is the practices within this multi-layered structure that have the power to produce new actors and social change.

5.3. Study III

The third study explores contemporary fact-checking, and the purpose of the study is to shed light on how the practice of fact-checking has evolved into a new media genre. The theoretical approach takes its point of departure in an understanding of the genre concept as a typified rhetorical situation (cf. Miller, 1984) and recognizes genre as a way of responding to a recurrent situation (cf. Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).

In this study, two snapshots of COVID-19 coverage by three well-known American fact-checkers, i.e., Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact, are analyzed. The coverage comes from one five-day sampling period in March 2020 and another in September of the same year. The material, which consisted of posts and other graphic elements featured on the three fact-checkers' websites, was collected and scrutinized through an open coding process (cf. Kolb, 2012). In the analysis, there was a particular focus on recurrent characteristics, and the results were categorized into the three themes *access*, *trust*, and *information poverty*.

These three analytical themes represent different aspects that underpin the contemporary practice of fact-checking and constitute the building blocks of fact-checking as a genre. The first theme, *access*, highlights how fact-checkers endeavor to facilitate accessibility by making their content easy to digest and understand. For example, by employing rating systems with simple and colorful symbols, as well as short and informative caption headlines, fact-checkers make the content that they produce easy to access.

The second theme, *trust*, highlights how fact-checkers strive to build trust as a way of promoting themselves. Transparency and accountability are important aspects present in the form of principles that fact-checkers invoke, for example, in accounting for their work methods.

The third theme, *information poverty*, makes visible the strong pedagogical perspective of the work that fact-checkers do. For example, many of the activities that fact-checkers engage in empower different kinds of literacy, for example, media literacy or health literacy.

Many of the beliefs and values that characterize discourses representative of the news media in general were found to recur in how the contemporary fact-checking genre is constructed. For example, a commitment to ethical guidelines is as important to fact-checkers as it is to traditional news reporters, and they all advocate truth. However, while traditional news reporters' truthfulness is established by how accurate their reporting is, fact-checkers' veracity is established by the quality of their assessments of the accuracy of the claims being fact-checked (Singer, 2021).

While the values and beliefs that are known to characterize traditional news media discourses are predominant in the construction of a fact-checking genre, fact-checkers also draw on practices typically found within academia in their fact-checking work. Although the practices of traditional news reporters also

follow strict ethical protocols, the lengthy and detailed methods statements that fact-checkers present on their websites are not a common feature in traditional news outlets. In an academic context, however, researchers are expected to deliver thorough accounts of how they obtained their results.

Fact-checking has been described as a new genre of journalism (e.g., Coddington et al., 2014; Graves, 2016, 2017, 2018; Lowrey, 2017) and, as we have seen, fact-checking and traditional news journalism differ in certain respects. Nevertheless, the challenges that the news media faces have been essential in paving the way for fact-checking as a new media genre. The decline of public trust is one such challenge (Wise & McLaughlin, 2016); the spread of disinformation, another (Rubin, 2019; Søre, 2017, 2021; Sullivan, 2019). The influx of misinformation facilitated by the technological innovations of recent decades has put the news media in a challenging position. The news media is seen as essential to any democratic society, and misinformation has been conceptualized as a threat to democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Brown, 2018; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Pickard, 2019). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the news media has felt impelled to take action. When a community is repeatedly faced with having to protect its social position, it has to find new ways of responding. This is how genres emerge (cf. Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). They are typified forms of rhetorical actions (Bazerman, 2002), and they enable social change and help conventionalize new *modi operandi*.

5.4. Study IV

The fourth and final study explores how fact-checking is discursively constructed in the Swedish news media. The purpose of the study is to gain knowledge of how the practice of contemporary fact-checking is understood in society.

The analysis draws on the three-dimensional model of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) and examines media texts from the two major Swedish newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) as communicative events. Through the analysis, key fact-checking discourses that are present in the Swedish news media were identified and insight was gained into the ideological beliefs associated with fact-checking in contemporary society.

As a journalistic practice, fact-checking is becoming increasingly popular and multiple new fact-checking organizations and initiatives have emerged in the past decade. Therefore, it is germane to investigate *how* fact-checking is talked about.

The reason for applying critical discourse analysis as a method and the theoretical postulates of this approach are rooted in the assumption that we create meaning through language.

The empirical material on which this study's findings are based comprises 130 texts published between January 1, 2014 and December 15, 2020. Of these texts, 66 were published in *DN* and 64 in *SvD*. The texts were selected and downloaded from the results of searching each newspaper's website and cover the period from when the term "fact-checking" began to increase in popularity up to the time when the material selection began. The material represents different textual media genres, for example, news and financial reports, opinion pieces, and book reviews.

In the analyzed material, three main discourses and multiple sub-discourses were identified. The discourses and sub-discourses were found to express conflicting and contradictory views of fact-checking and of why journalists should engage in it. The first identified discourse was labeled "the affirmative discourse." This discourse was found to contain two sub-discourses. One of these sub-discourses portrays fact-checking as a remedy for disinformation, while the other understands it as a way to establish truth and objectivity. The second identified discourse is "the adverse discourse," in which three sub-discourses were identified. The first of these sub-discourses disputes the effectiveness of fact-checking. The second sub-discourse portrays fact-checking as having the ability to impede democracy. The third sub-discourse understands the practice as legitimizing conspiracy theories. Lastly, a third key discourse was identified, i.e., "the agency discourse." This discourse was found to comprise two sub-discourses articulating opposing conceptions of the actors involved in fact-checking and the roles of these actors. The first sub-discourse understands fact-checking as a journalistic responsibility, while the second conceptualizes social media as an actor with a key role in the work of fact-checking information. This actor is often understood to be (un)able to perform fact-checking, and this is believed to have social consequences.

The perspectives found in the explored texts correspond, to a high degree, with those found in the previous literature on the topic. However, although many of the conflicting discourses identified in the analyzed texts are consistent with those found in the literature, the analyzed material conceptualizes fact-checking as much more complex and politicized than most previous research has shown.

6. Results, discussion, and final conclusions

In this thesis, the emergence of two particular social information practices—the content moderation of online comments sections and contemporary fact-checking—has been investigated within the information landscape of digital journalism in the context of the broader news media landscape. The focus has been on how journalists, through their experiences of perceived problems, help produce new sayings and doings within digital journalism. *The aim of this thesis is to explore how the information practices of content moderation and fact-checking are constructed in the information landscape of digital journalism. More specifically, it describes how those practices are constructed through journalists' and news media professionals' conceptualization of the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of misinformation.*

Besides shedding light on content moderation and fact-checking and on how journalists construct their information practices in the contemporary news media landscape and the information landscape of digital journalism, this thesis provides insight into how information-related problems and their proposed resolutions are conceptualized and enacted. A closer look at content moderation and fact-checking, as emerging information practices, can provide insight into ways of dealing with problems of the information era. As emerging information practices, they are also of particular interest as they can provide insight into how and why information landscapes evolve as they do.

Both content moderation and fact-checking have emerged in response to specific human behaviors that are considered problematic. Neither inflammatory speech in human interaction nor the spreading of misrepresentative information is a new phenomenon. Yet, the specific practices of the content moderation of comments sections and contemporary fact-checking as we know them have developed recently in an increasingly digitalized news media landscape that indisputably facilitates the reproduction of some of these behaviors. Perhaps most obviously, posting something in an online comments section takes only a click, and the same applies to the sharing and resharing of content.

When studying content moderation and fact-checking, it is necessary to understand how the problems they are supposed to help solve, i.e., hate speech and misinformation, are understood by those who work to counteract them. Both content moderation and fact-checking have already been widely explored within research domains such as media studies (e.g., Amazeen, 2020;

Graves, 2018; Graves & Anderson, 2020; Ksiazek, 2018; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020; Naab et al., 2018; Wolfgang, 2018; York et al., 2020). However, instead of investigating content moderation and fact-checking per se, this thesis fills a knowledge gap regarding how these practices emerge as information practices within the specific informational context that has produced them.

By approaching content moderation and fact-checking from an information studies perspective, this thesis provides insight into content moderation and fact-checking as informational undertakings and relates them to the specific informational contexts within which they have emerged. It is important to point out that multiple other practices that journalists and users engage in are related to, overlap with, and complement content moderation and fact-checking in various ways. For example, regular news production has evolved alongside them in the information landscape of digital journalism and in the broader news media landscape. In Article I, one quoted interviewee mentioned that they always considered the time of the week when publishing different kinds of news. As they knew that controversial news topics received many comments, they made sure not to post something that they suspected would be much debated on a Friday afternoon just before the weekend, when they had fewer resources for moderating and fact-checking user content.

In addition to examining the overlapping and shaping of practical doings, this thesis also shows how the two practices influence and are influenced by digital-related discourses as well as discourses related to the broader news media landscape. It shows how the interplay between practices and discourses help produce new and typified responses to the perceived problems of misbehaving users and the spread of misinformation.

To achieve the aim of this thesis, four research questions were formulated. These research questions have guided the investigation of how content moderation and fact-checking emerge in the contemporary information landscape of digital journalism.

- RQ1: How do journalists understand the information practices they engage in?
- RQ2: What discourses on the emerging information practices of journalists can be identified?
- RQ3: What are the infrastructural constituents of journalists' information practices in relation to the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of misinformation?
- RQ4: How do new rhetorical journalistic genres emerge through journalists' enactment of information practices in the information landscape of digital journalism?

In the following, these four research questions and how the four articles answer them will be discussed and reviewed. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, the results and conclusions of the study will be elaborated on in terms of their practical and theoretical implications.

6.1. Information practices

The first research question—“how do journalists understand the information practices they engage in?”—focused on journalists’ understandings of the information practices they engage in and enact. The answer to this question draws from all four articles included in the thesis.

Through analyzing journalists’ narratives, content from three fact-checking organizations’ websites, and newspaper texts, it was possible to gain insight into journalists’ motivations for engaging in particular information practices. Both content moderation and fact-checking involve dealing with perceived problems. Journalists perceive users whom they consider to be breaking the rules stipulated in the news outlets’ codes of conduct as problematic. They also perceive it to be a problem that misinformation is being spread either intentionally or unintentionally. Despite the challenges involved and the considerable resources required to do this work, journalists and other news media professionals consider it important to engage in content moderation and fact-checking. Their explanations for why they do this help to clarify the shaping of content moderation and fact-checking but also, in more general terms, how and why comparable new information practices emerge in the contemporary news media landscape.

From the journalists’ perspective, some of the comments that users post have to be removed due to their offensive content, although the comments sections are understood to provide people with a platform on which to be heard. This means that journalists need to advocate erasing user-generated content in comments sections while simultaneously arguing that their actions help maintain such democratic values as free speech. One journalist quoted in Article I advocated the removal of content by referring to the same principles that they also claimed had motivated them to maintain comments sections in the first place, i.e., that they are a way to give more people a voice:

And we have the feeling that it’s been worthwhile [to apply stricter moderation]. Because the changed climate of discussion is great and the others are coming back.

(Article I, p. 701)

In other words, when stricter content moderation is conducted, the journalist had observed, more people would engage in discussions. The removal of racist, misogynist, and sexist content was considered to lead to a more diverse

crowd in the comments sections, and people who would otherwise not engage in discussions of the news would start to participate. In addition, as illustrated in Article I, journalists also refer to their work with comments sections as a way of creating a place where people can meet within journalism, which was understood as something positive.

The audience interaction that occurs in comments sections was described as one way to listen to the public voice. Listening to people's voices was not only understood as adding value to journalism but also as part of what journalism is. The norms and values of what journalism is understood to be about were found to play an important role in why journalists engage in the maintenance of comments sections. However, norms and values are also important incentives for not maintaining comments sections. Article I found that journalists often perform a balancing act between the hands-on experience of their work and journalistic ideals when they explain why it is important to maintain comments sections, and why they believe that they have a responsibility to moderate these comments sections.

That journalists' norms and ideals have been equally used as a reason to remove comments sections and as a motivation to keep them finds support in Ksiazek and Springer's (2020) study. According to those authors, the news outlets that decided to remove comments functions often had very clear and normative ideas about what comments were supposed to be like. The arguments of the news outlets that had closed down their comments sections cited the sometimes rude and misinformative nature of user-generated content and the safeguarding of sensitive topics in news articles. This thesis shows that there is, in fact, ongoing negotiation between, on the one hand, the wish to provide users with a space in which to interact over news content and, on the other, upholding journalistic quality—a normative idea that is closely related to parallel ideas of what is considered an appropriate comment.

Although the role of norms, values, and emotions in the articles of this thesis has primarily been discussed in relation to the case of content moderation, it is clear that they play an important role in underpinning fact-checking too. For example, as seen in Article III, fact-checking organizations also draw on journalistic ideals and values when legitimizing how they work. Furthermore, Article IV shows that the uneasy rapport between ideals and real life does not pertain only to content moderation. Such a balancing act can also be identified in the arguments that journalists make in relation to fact-checking.

All the articles show that norms, values, and emotions are important underpinnings of how and why journalists and news media professionals choose to engage in the information practices of content moderation and fact-checking. Also, as illustrated in Article IV, fact-checking can be understood as a weapon with which to fight lies. Furthermore, some of the journalists who voiced their opinions in the studied texts argued that they had an obligation to search for truth. For example, the author of one article that was quoted in the article stated: "I will, if necessary, even take part in discussions on whether or

not the earth is flat—I will do everything in my power to fight lies” (Article IV, p. 130).

However, as shown in Article IV, some journalists spoke out against fact-checking, as this practice was understood to represent a way to exert power over what should be considered right or wrong, which journalists should arguably not engage in. Ironically, another argument against fact-checking was the weak effect it was considered to have. This means that, while arguing that journalists should be cautious about engaging in fact-checking, since journalism produces “angled images of reality” (Article IV, p. 131) rather than truth, some journalists also claimed that fact-checking had no power to counteract the spread of misinformation. Interestingly, Article IV also shows that this last claim was, in turn, contradicted by yet another adverse opinion on fact-checking as a journalistic practice; if indeed it had any effect at all, fact-checking might risk legitimizing conspiracy theories and cementing the beliefs that inaccurate claims may have engendered.

In other words, the results indicate that how fact-checking is conceptualized in the journalistic community is not at all uniform. A multitude of arguments for and against contemporary fact-checking and journalists’ reasons for engaging in it emerged in Article IV. The article also showed that opposing and contradictory arguments for and against fact-checking were legitimized by the same principles and traditions that underpin the profession. This supports Hermida’s (2011a) earlier findings that journalists’ professional ideology legitimizes the journalistic culture and underpins the practices they engage in. The claim that ideology also seeps into and influences journalists’ relationships with their audience (Hermida, 2011a) is also supported by the findings of this thesis.

Although the sentiments for or against the practices were conflicting, no obvious major country-wise differences between those who expressed them were recognized. Instead, the same journalistic principles were found to underpin the content moderation of the journalists participating in the interviews conducted for articles I and II. Even more interestingly, the same—or at least very similar—principles were also found to underpin the activities of American fact-checkers in Article III and Swedish fact-checking discourses in Article IV.

Enacting the information practices of content moderation and fact-checking involved some difficulties that had to be taken into account. For example, it was clear from the empirical interview material from which the first two studies drew their findings that journalists’ experiences with the content moderation of comments sections were not entirely positive. In an interview from August 2017, one journalist expressed their frustration over users who do not take the time to read an article before commenting on it:

We are very tired of people who, you know, who don't read the article. Who barely read the post. Then you feel like, well, can't they use those minutes to open the article and read it? ... Because, you know, sometimes you get really tired.

(Article I, p. 703)

Another journalist, also quoted in the same article, complained about the mean-spirited and sometimes racist responses that articles into which they had put a lot of work sometimes evoked. Yet, despite these sometimes rather emotional views of reader interaction in comments sections, all the interviewed journalists argued for the importance of maintaining online comments sections. This means that there is ongoing negotiation between the social benefits that the comments sections afford and the difficulties that they involve for those who work on maintaining them.

The results highlight the conflict that exists between different ideas of why journalists engage in content moderation and fact-checking. These conflicting ideas are often expressed simultaneously, drawing on different understandings of the role that journalists and journalism play in society. To cite an example, the news media provides comments sections as a way to give people a voice and thus uphold democracy. However, the news media also conducts content moderation, which involves removing voices perceived as offensive. The reason for this, according to articles I and II, is that these voices are understood to diminish the democratic ideals that the comments sections were supposedly intended to support.

As seen in Article IV, fact-checking also entails conflicting ways of relating to the democratic ideals that underpin journalism. In a democracy, free speech is a key principle. However, because the right to free speech is also used to spread misinformative content, there is a need for fact-checking. To a group of professionals who, according to Uschinski and Butler (2013), see themselves as watchdogs of truth, the spreading of misinformation is, according to earlier research (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Pickard, 2019), understood to impact society in a way that undermines democracy. Following this, fact-checking is understood as a democracy-enhancing activity (cf. Amazeen, 2020). That this is the case was confirmed in articles III and IV, which found a connection between how fact-checking is perceived by those engaging in it and their role in maintaining democratic values. For example, as the spread of misinformation is understood to be harmful to democracy, countering this spread is understood to benefit it. However, as seen in Article IV, fact-checking was simultaneously and contradictorily also conceptualized as a tool that could impede democracy by suppressing the freedom of speech of those who spread (mis)information.

While Article III shows how fact-checkers explain their information practice by turning to specific professional principles, for example, their obligation to educate the public, Article IV shows that the practices' ties to the

professional principles are, in fact, much more complex. When explaining journalists' engagement in the information practice through its ties to shared norms and shared ideology, it is easy to miss how differently these ties are constructed. It is, in other words, not enough to say that content moderation and fact-checking align well with the journalistic mission as it is understood by most journalists. As articles I and IV show, the very same principles can be used to underpin arguments both for and against the same information practices.

To summarize, the results show that both the content moderation of comments sections and fact-checking are enacted in a struggle between contradictory ideals of, on the one hand, empowering free speech and, on the other, combating the forces that use free speech to suppress, silence, or misinform others. Although the results of this thesis align with the findings reported in the previous literature that has conceptualized digital media as both enhancing and harming democracy (e.g., McNair, 2018; Rider & Peters, 2018), the thesis also shows that the connection between the information practices of content moderation and fact-checking and their multiple, partly conflicting ideological principles is much more complex and multidimensional than has been conceptualized in the literature. This thesis shows that the decision to engage in content moderation and fact-checking is not just based on the assumption that the practices align well with professional ideals. Instead, this decision is a result of negotiation between different ways of interpreting the journalistic mission and the hands-on experiences of working with content moderation and fact-checking.

6.2. Discourses

The second research question addresses the discourses that relate to the studied information practices. Although an explicit discourse-theoretical approach was only applied in Article IV, articles I, II, and III also address the question of *what discourses on the emerging information practices of journalists can be identified* by providing insight into how content moderation and fact-checking are talked about and understood in the contemporary news media landscape.

In the material analyzed for Article IV, three major discourses were identified and labeled: "the affirmative discourse," "the adverse discourse," and "the agency discourse." Each of these discourses contained multiple conflicting, contradictory, and sometimes overlapping sub-discourses. Although not explicitly conceptualized as discourses, the thematic analyses in articles I and II provide indications of the impact of discourses on the meaning of maintaining comments sections and conducting content moderation that are just as conflicting as those concerning fact-checking. Some, but not all, of these discourses and sub-discourses reflect views of fact-checking that were consistent with how the information practice is portrayed in the literature. As

seen in the literature review of this thesis, most scholars view fact-checking as an effective way of correcting information and maintaining the news media's objectivity and credibility (e.g., Amazeen, 2015; Damasceno & Patrício, 2020; Graves, 2016). However, as the previous section has already explained on the basis of Article IV, the discourses on contemporary fact-checking also refer to its adverse effects. Similarly, as seen in articles I and II, content moderation is understood as necessary to keep comments sections free from abusive and hurtful comments. However, as seen in Article I, one quoted journalist emphasized the toll that the work with comments sections was exacting. The work invested in content moderation involved a certain amount of hopelessness in terms of what it was actually believed to achieve and the cost that this achievement would entail. Also, another journalist, also quoted in Article I, stated that they were discouraged by trying to argue with the users who posted in comment sections as they had observed that this sometimes resulted in threats.

One key observation regarding the discourses is that they are not always well-aligned with one another. As discussed in the previous section on information practices, the value of comments sections and content moderation is negotiated between different journalistic principles that can simultaneously be applied as arguments either for or against journalist' engagement in the work of content moderation. Similarly, content moderation has been portrayed as a way to increase interaction, while simultaneously being recognized as a practice that censors the public voice.

These contradictions are exemplified by how the interviewed journalists were concurrently advocating both openness and control. For example, as seen in Article I, one journalist said that they were very tolerant of how people chose to express themselves in comments sections. After all, it was believed that people should have the right to express their opinions, even if these opinions did not reflect the mainstream outlook. However, in parallel, all the journalists interviewed for articles I and II saw the necessity of conducting content moderation to remove posts that were racist or sexist. Some of their arguments for stricter content moderation were often based on the observation that offensive user posts make the comments sections less diverse and less democratic. Although, as noted by Farkas and Schou (2020), the concept of democracy is often used perfunctorily in connection with journalistic practices, participatory online practices, or any other practices in the public space of the web, this thesis finds that the connection between contemporary notions of democracy and the studied information practices is particularly strong. Farkas and Schou (2020) further suggested that notions of failing democracy have been found to be closely linked to another contemporary concept, namely, that of a "post-truth" environment. This was supported by Article IV, in which failing democratic ideas were found to be linked with social media in general. Any early naiveté concerning social media as advocates of democracy has been abandoned. For example, in a quoted passage in Article IV, the author asked:

Do you remember when Facebook and Twitter were claimed to spell the end of the dictatorships in the world? Instead, it is the social networks that have turned out not to be compatible with democracy.

(Article IV, p. 136)

An argument for stricter control when it comes to fact-checking in particular is, as shown in Article IV, that social media was often blamed for not doing enough to counteract misinformation and to buttress truth. This finding supports Farkas and Schou's (2020) claim that social media in particular has become increasingly vilified as a conduit for the undemocratic ideals that underpin a post-truth environment. A further crucial point made by Farkas and Schou (2020) is that the concepts of democracy and truth have discursively coalesced to the extent that the one can be replaced by the other. In this thesis, truth is discussed explicitly in Article IV, which shows that the conceptualization of fact-checking as a tool with which to find truth was much more controversial than it appeared to be in the literature. Although a discourse that understands fact-checking as a way to establish truth was, as seen in the article, identified as one of the sub-discourses of the affirmative discourse, it is clear that this is also contested in other discourses identified in the same article:

The journalist's relationship to truth is in the news. The language of truth gives her the leading role as the author of the first draft of the history books. ... journalists should not be the ones to decide what is true or false.

(Article IV, p. 130)

The above quotation clearly illustrates the contradictory nature of the discourses on fact-checking in relation to truth. Such contradictions could also be identified in relation to content moderation. For example, as seen in the previous section on information practices, the providing of comments sections is understood as a way to allow more voices to be heard, while content moderation is simultaneously conducted to remove posts that express voices considered to be harmful. As also seen in the previous section on information practices, the sometimes rude and misinformative (read, untrue) nature of user-generated content found in comments sections led news outlets to shut down their comments sections entirely. However, simultaneously, another discourse was identified that argued for the importance of comments sections as adding value to the news outlet beyond merely providing users with a space in which to make themselves heard:

A user forum on which you can only write stuff and then delete comments. That might just as well shut down. It brings nothing to anyone Yeah, well, five years ago it may have been enough.

(Article 1, p. 701)

This quotation evinces that journalists are aware of the change in the general attitude toward comments sections that has occurred within their own digital journalism circles in just a few years. While it may have been acceptable to keep comments sections as “readers’ playgrounds” (Ye & Li, 2006, p. 255) some years ago, the audience participation in comments sections now must fulfill some other purpose as well, for example, giving journalists ideas for new stories and making them aware of trending topics (Heinonen, 2011). These findings reflect the discursive tensions within journalists’ work on comments sections that have been observed in the literature (e.g., J. Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). As Article I observed, much in line with what Ksiazek and Springer (2020) have written, theoretical conceptions of how comments sections should function sometimes clash with the experiences of those who actually work with them.

A further central finding of evident contradictions between discourses on both content moderation and fact-checking is that, when explaining their work with comments sections in general and content moderation in particular, the interviewed journalists drew from various discourses within their information landscape. The narratives of the interviewed journalists in articles I and II reflect conflicting ideas about content moderation. The same journalists could express views of why it was important that news outlets keep maintaining comments sections for users while also expressing deep frustration with the kind of interaction occurring within them.

Just as the value of maintaining comments sections and the resources that need to be invested in content moderation must be discursively negotiated in terms of the benefits they can provide for the news organization, Article I shows that they also must be negotiated on a personal level by the individuals who engage in these activities. This negotiation does not always lead to the personal conclusion that comments sections are a good thing. Other interviewees with similar experiences agreed that content moderation was sometimes frustrating work. However, despite these experiences, none of the interviewees went as far as to suggest that the news media’s maintenance of comments sections was in itself a waste of time. Instead, they generally expressed the opinion that there is a key discourse that includes positive attitudes about news outlets having comment sections, for example, the idea that comment sections add value to journalism. The journalists also expressed ideas about the importance of giving people a space in which to express their opinions. Obviously, some of the journalists’ arguments contradicted some of their hands-on experiences of their work. These findings support Reich

(2011), who asserted that many journalists were unhappy about the low-quality content that comments sections brought into journalism, while simultaneously showing that they also found that it was worth investing their time and energy in these sections. As the recollections of specific user-generated content that the journalists recounted in the interviews for articles I and II contained so many overwhelmingly negative experiences, it is interesting that they should still argue for the maintenance of comments sections.

Although all the interviewed journalists advocated content moderation, there were different discourses on how strict this should be. Different factors played into and influenced the negotiation between the benefits of strict versus less strict content moderation, and this negotiation contained complex and often contradictory discursive constructions of the kind of work that journalists engage in when providing users with a voice. While doing this, the journalists—as Lloyd (2006, 2007, 2010a, 2011) suggested that practitioners generally do—drew on their knowledge of their particular information landscape to determine how to act in certain situations, and the norms and values of a professional field are woven into the fabric of that landscape. Article IV further shows how feelings and emotions are as important for the discursive construction of fact-checking as they are in the work with comments sections. As indicated by the results of this study, considerable conflict and negotiation is required in order to fit this practice into the work of journalists.

This means that the results of the thesis do not quite align with how fact-checking has been discursively constructed in the literature. While the controversies relating to content moderation have been discussed to a certain extent in the literature (Amazeen, 2015; Uscinski, 2015), fact-checking usually appears to be significantly less complex than it appears in the material analyzed for Article IV. The earlier literature portrays contemporary fact-checking as discursively constructed as a new kind of journalism (cf. Coddington et al., 2014; Graves, 2017, 2018; Graves et al., 2016; Lowrey, 2017), and, to the author's knowledge, this understanding has not been greatly contested. Although the material analyzed for Article IV also frames fact-checking as a journalistic practice, the emergence of this new kind of journalism appeared to go much less smoothly than it does in the literature. While fact-checking is also generally understood as a journalistic practice in the analyzed material, this categorization did not at all appear to be as self-evident as in the literature. In fact, the analyzed material contained opinions that repeatedly questioned whether journalists should engage in the practice at all.

Although generally consistent with the literature, the discourses and sub-discourses on fact-checking identified in the analyzed material were more multifaceted, and fact-checking was much more politicized, than in the literature. For example, despite the contradictory views of whether or not fact-checking ought to be practiced by journalists, it is unsurprisingly generally

categorized as a type of journalism. After all, it is a practice in which journalists and news media organizations have come to invest quite extensive resources (Graves, 2016), even though its effects have been questioned (Uscinski, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013) and some have noted that it may have an effect opposite to the intended one (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Sanna et al., 2002; Uscinski, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). However, the fact that it is characterized as something “new” also distinguishes it from other practices that journalists have already been engaged in for much longer. While still applying the tools and methods of journalism, fact-checkers are claimed to apply them in different ways than they do when engaging in other types of journalism and reporting.

That fact-checking is discussed as something new is also unsurprising since the practice of fact-checking public claims has produced new public actors and organizations, such as FactCheck and PolitiFact, that actively strive to separate what they do from other kinds of reporting. Yet, as seen in Article III, not everything published on the fact-checking organizations’ websites is a fact-check. For example, the Conversation post “Why Handwashing Really is as Important as Doctors Say” (The Conversation/Scone Massaquoi, 2020), which was republished by Snopes, and the article “Timeline: How Donald Trump responded to the Coronavirus pandemic” (Greenberg, 2020), published by PolitiFact are, strictly speaking, not fact-checks. The boundaries between fact-checking and regular news reporting are in fact not as sharp as they are sometimes thought to be. Also, as we have seen in the case of Faktiskt (In fact), the collaborative fact-checking project briefly discussed in Article IV that included some of the major Swedish news outlets, regular news outlets have also taken up the practice of contemporary fact-checking. The task has not been exclusively appropriated by fact-checking organizations.

The three themes in Article III that encompass different conceptualizations of the work that the three fact-checking organizations Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact engage in can also be understood to represent discursive constructions of fact-checking as a practice. In the study, the themes—*access*, *trust*, and *information poverty*—represent three different discursive underpinnings of contemporary fact-checking as a social practice and genre. These themes, which parallel corresponding discourses, illustrate why the fact-checkers feel that they must do what they do in response to the problem of misinformation. In other words, as ideas about democracy are found to underpin how interactive practices such as content moderation are legitimized (e.g., Hermida, 2011b; Van Duyn et al., 2021), democratic discourses have also been found to legitimize fact-checking practices (e.g., York et al., 2020). In addition, in this thesis, contemporary fact-checking was also found to be underpinned by traditional ideas of the media’s perceived role in society.

The final theme identified in Article III, *information poverty*, also illustrates how the fact-checkers’ intentions are underpinned by pedagogical ambitions. Examples of this mentioned in the article are the eye-catching symbols that inform the readers of the result of a fact-check before they read

it and the simple sentences of the fact-checks that make them easy to digest. Usually, the texts are structured in a way that makes their content very easy to digest, with bullet points frequently used.

Article III shows that the perceived obligation to educate their audience on matters of public interest appears to be a strong source of motivation for fact-checkers. Historically, there is nothing new about journalists understanding that their profession has an educational dimension. Promoting knowledge of what is happening in the world and disseminating information for the benefit of the public are core tasks of journalism (Deuze, 2005). Such aspirations are deeply embedded in the understanding of what it is that journalists do (Allern & Pollack, 2019; Deuze, 2005). In many ways, these ambitions overlap with those of the librarians who are engaged in educational projects to strengthen information literacy. In a library context, the "poverty discourse" has been criticized (Haider & Bawden, 2007) and alternative framings of being information literate that do not dichotomize between information rich or information literate, on the one hand, and information needy, information poor, or information illiterate, on the other, have been suggested (Huvila, 2018). However, to the author's knowledge, equivalent criticism is lacking in the literature on contemporary fact-checking, which is fairly consistently discussed in terms of informing fact-poor members of the public rather than improving literacies in a broader sense. Although Article III found the third theme, *information poverty*, to represent the strongest educational aspirations, the first theme of *access* also involved a pedagogical dimension. The usually simple and colorful symbols often used by fact-checkers make the results of a fact-check easy to understand and thus teach the audience to be critical of claims being spread publicly. In Article III, the broader educational ambitions were illustrated by content from the websites of Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact that aimed to strengthen various kinds of literacy, including media literacy and health literacy. One example of this mentioned in the study was published on FactCheck's website in the subsection "SciCheck" on March 30, 2020. FactCheck asked "Does ibuprofen make COVID-19 worse?" and then went on to state that "there is no evidence that ibuprofen or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs make COVID-19 more severe. You should consult your doctor before changing medication."

One further key finding of this thesis in relation to discourses concerns how they are, as already shown by Krzyzanowski (2014), grounded in the principles and values that journalists believe underpin their professional practices. The notion of objectivity and a commitment to truth provide an illustrative example of this in terms of how they are connected to the routines of journalists' work (cf. Mindich, 1998; Spyridou et al., 2013) and, as this thesis shows, to their information practices and how these are discussed. The notion of objectivity has, since the end of the nineteenth century, been central to the Western understanding of what journalism is (Karlsson, 2010; Mindich, 1998). However, objectivity has many dimensions. One of them is facticity; others are truth and accuracy (Mindich, 1998). These concepts have come to

replace the concept of objectivity in journalists' ethics code. For example, in 1996, "objectivity" was dropped from the American Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (Mindich, 1998). Still, in Article IV, objectivity was found to play a role in one of the sub-discourses of the affirmative discourse. As shown in the study, the concept was paired with one of the other values that has often been used as its replacement, i.e., the concept of truth. This sub-discourse understood fact-checking as a way to establish truth and objectivity. Objectivity was found to be interdiscursively connected to the purpose of fact-checking and, according to this sub-discourse, fact-checking was represented as being based on facts.

The negotiable nature of concepts that are often used more or less synonymously to legitimize journalistic practices may provide some explanation for the conflicting discourses for or against content moderation and fact-checking. After all, as observed in the four studies, these are the values that made the practices meaningful to those who engaged in them. The findings indicate, as also noted by Karlsson (2010), that, while "objectivity" still has practical implications for journalistic practices, it is a very abstract concept. Tuchman (1972) argued that rituals aiming to uphold an objective perspective in journalism also serve to legitimize professional practices. She also argued that journalists navigate "between libel and absurdity by identifying 'objectivity' with 'facts'" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 664). Although several decades old, Tuchman's observation is descriptive of how the discourses on both content moderation and fact-checking operate in the information landscape of contemporary digital journalism as well as within the broader news media landscape. Tightly interwoven, practices and discourses influence each other in such a way that what we do affects how we talk about something and vice versa. Therefore, the theoretical concepts of practice and discourse complement each other. As we have seen in this thesis, the discourses on the practices of content moderation and fact-checking identified here are conflicting, and some discourses even contain explicitly negative views of the practices and how journalists engage in them. Journalists also vary in how they discursively construct the work they do. However, the results indicate that journalists and media professionals generally engage in work on comments sections and fact-checking because they believe that these undertakings represent core parts of their professional mission—even though they are not always comfortable with all the connotations and implications.

6.3. Information infrastructure

The third research question was: “What are the infrastructural constituents of journalists’ information practices relating to the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of misinformation?” This question served as the point of departure for an investigation of the underpinning structures that tie information practices and discourses together to form practice-discourse-infrastructure bundles. The information infrastructure, in this thesis, has chiefly been explored in the context of the content moderation of news media comments sections that was investigated in Article II. In this article, the information infrastructure provides a scaffolding for what people say and do when they engage in content moderation. However, it also incorporates technological tools, institutions (e.g., news outlets and private content moderation companies), and people (e.g., regular users who discuss news in comments sections). In the context of this thesis, infrastructures are underpinning structures that are conceptualized in two ways. First, although the term “infrastructure” is conventionally used to refer to technologies and a physically installed base, this thesis underlines how information practices in practice-discourse-infrastructure bundles convey normative ideas about how specific issues, in this case vitriolic posts in comments sections and the spreading of misinformation, ought to be handled. Second, various technologies, discourses, and human practices in the bundles interfere with and support one another through the infrastructure.

As mentioned above, Article II applies an information infrastructural perspective in investigating the installed base of the content moderation that occurs in news media comments sections. Linked together in a heterogenous infrastructure are: 1) media outlets’ provision of comments sections as an interactive space; 2) media outlets’ own internal and organized content moderation; 3) the use of hashtags as a device to raise awareness of inappropriate content in comments sections; 4) organized content moderation conducted by external actors; and 5) miscellaneous activities that regular users engage in that thwart the development of a vitriolic climate in comments sections.

The focus of Article II is not so much on the various actors engaging in the practices but rather on the specific practices that they engage in. The study found that practices rather than only, for example, actors and tools, constitute the building blocks of the kind of information infrastructure that has arisen to support measures that address the problem of online misconduct in comments sections. From the perspective of the conceptual apparatus of this thesis shown in Figure 1, this means that certain practices can become infrastructures through the formation of practice-discourse-infrastructure bundles.

News media organizations engage in the maintenance of comments sections, and these comments sections allow their readers to interact with a news outlet and discuss the content of articles. However, as illustrated in

Article II, this interaction does not include only the news outlets and their readers; rather, a number of actors and their practices have come to be entangled in an expanding web of practices that have grown up around the maintenance of comments sections.

Many of the practices were found to interconnect through an information infrastructure that involved very different sets of activities. Also, the motives of the actors engaged in the practices often differed. Of course, as seen in Article II, there are also similarities between, for example, the kind of content moderation conducted by the news outlets' own in-house content moderators and the outsourced content moderation conducted by external companies such as Interaktiv Säkerhet (Interactive Security), whose services were discussed by two of the eleven journalists participating in the study at the time of the data collection. However, they also contain important differences. For example, while both practices entailed the activity of deleting user posts considered to break the rules of the comments sections, only in-house reporters were allowed to actively respond to posts with questions or reflections:

We have a deal with Interaktiv Säkerhet. They are supposed to audit all the comments and any comment that breaks our rules should be removed within an hour. That is their responsibility, but they never go in and respond [to a comment].

(Article II)

However, a more obvious difference between internal and external content moderation is the motive for conducting it. While the journalists interviewed for articles I and II have to conduct content moderation to uphold a notion of what is considered in line with their companies' moral obligations or to avoid having any libelous content on their websites, the external content moderators engage in the practice because it is the service their business is paid to provide.

Other practices involved in the same information infrastructural constellation also have considerable overlap. For example, while regular users do not have the power to delete the comments of other users, they can respond and react to posts they find offensive. Like the in-house reporters who conduct content moderation, other regular users who happen to be present in the comments sections are known to respond to posts that they find offensive or misleading either by speaking up against the tone of the post or by correcting the information it contains. For example, one journalist who was quoted in both articles I and II indicated that "our crowd isn't much fun to hang out with [for those being disruptive] because you're confronted" (Article II).

Other members of the public who engage in content-moderation-like practices are the loosely organized members of the organization #JagÄrHär (#IAMHere). The members of this organization react to posts that they

consider offensive by hashtagging them. Although neither in-house reporters nor external content moderators use the hashtag as a tool in their content moderation, their practices share something with #JagÄrHär: the fact that their practices have emerged for the specific purpose of improving the climate in online comments sections.

In the case of the organization #JagÄrHär, the hashtag came to be used specifically as an interactive tool to reduce the toxic climate in comments sections. In other words, the five practices examined in Article II are made up of sets of different activities that the actors engage in for different reasons. For example, #JagÄrHär is a non-profit organization that harnesses the voluntarily and loosely organized activities of members of the public, while the private company Interaktiv Säkerhet has a business arrangement with the media outlets for which it conducts content moderation. However, despite their differences, both actors have emerged as a consequence of the news media's practice of maintaining online comments sections. Thus, the results of Article II show that the infrastructure that has emerged to underpin the contemporary maintenance of comments sections is the result of many different actors adopting various practices and adjusting them to fit their needs. Earlier literature reports similar observations and claims that both the practices and the infrastructures that interlink them are products of socio-technical activities (e.g., Henfridsson & Bygstad, 2013). As explained in the theory chapter of this thesis, infrastructures embody and convey historically specific ideas and norms about appropriate ways of doing things. Article II shows that various reasons for which actors choose to engage in content moderation meet in news media comment sections in such a way that the information infrastructure that underpins the practices and discourses ties a miscellaneous set of activities and understandings to the landscape in which they occur.

Although the practices studied here are inevitably linked to the digital tools and platforms used by journalists to engage in the activities that constitute the practices, it is not the technology itself that drives the process of change. Of course, the global infrastructure that makes up the Internet has played a role in the process of change that the media has undergone in recent decades, especially since the introduction of mobile Internet access. However, as observed by Couldry (2012), it is important to be aware that digital communications technologies have generated numerous myths, for example, about their ability to advance democracy, peace, and political stability. In this respect it is not only the infrastructures themselves that are meaningful in the bundles of practices, discourses, and infrastructures but also how these different components are imagined.

Although the Internet, which is used by journalists to maintain comments sections, is an information infrastructure in its own right, and the technologies that interconnect with it are indisputably essential to the information landscape of digital journalism, infrastructures do not emerge simply because the technology is there. As shown by Article II, they emerge because people

engage in the practices that then become part of the network. As discussed in Article II, this can be exemplified by the appearance of #JagÄrHär and its members' practice of hashtagging posts that they find offensive. In an interview quoted in this article, the interviewed journalist reflected on the increased interaction they had recently observed in the comments sections. Apart from mentioning stricter content moderation as a possible explanation for this, they also acknowledged that there may be other reasons for it, for example, the activities of the group #JagÄrHär. In the study, one journalist observed that "their [i.e., #JagÄrHär's] presence has the effect that others dare speak up" (Article II). This means that the activities of one actor, in this case #JagÄrHär, had consequences for other actors and influenced their behavior in the comments sections. In accordance with the literature, the results of the article support the claim that, although infrastructures cannot change or be changed overnight, the whole structure must adjust to those changes that occur when some parts of an infrastructure change (Hanseth & Lundberg, 2001).

In Article II, social and relational dimensions are highlighted in a way that supports Star and Ruhleder's (1996) assertion that infrastructures are relationships rather than sets of things. In accordance with Star and Ruhleder's theoretical reasoning, the infrastructure studied in Article II is learned as part of a community. It consists of various practices that have to do with the moderation and curation of content in news media comments sections. Also, in the capacity of the structure that these practices have become, the structure "is 'sunk' into, inside of, other structures, social arrangements and technologies" (Star & Ruhleder, 1996, p. 113) such as the overarching infrastructures of social media, the Internet, and news media production.

In this thesis, the research device of information infrastructure has only been applied to the investigation of emerging practices of maintaining comments sections in general and conducting content moderation in particular. However, showing how the different forms of content moderation are infrastructurally connected illustrates how information practices in general are linked with one another and with the landscape in which they occur.

Content moderation and contemporary fact-checking have emerged partly in reaction to two very specific user activities that are perceived as problematic: first, the problem of people who engage with news media comments sections in a way perceived as offensive to others; second, the problem of people who spread information that is untrue or misleading and that is perceived to have the capacity to create confusion and false ideas about the state of affairs.

While the interconnecting practices of fact-checkers have not been explored in the same way as content moderation was in Article II, information infrastructures are also assumed to influence how practices for responding to the spread of misinformation online take shape. This is something that we see in Article III, which focuses on an emerging genre of fact-checking. Although not the focus of the article, infrastructural constituents of journalists'

information practices in relation to fact-checking are found in this study. As mentioned in Article III, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies launched the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in 2015, and the principles stipulated by the Network apply to its member organizations around the world. While such initiatives have undoubtedly influenced how journalists and other news media professionals construct fact-checking, fact-checkers have also been influenced by one another. The popularity of the kind of rating systems with colorful symbols that Snopes and PolitiFact employ to communicate the results of their fact-checks have inspired other fact-checkers to create similar systems. One such example was the Swedish Viralgranskaren, which employed stamp-like symbols to communicate whether the content of a story was true, false, or mixed. This illustrates that the world of fact-checkers is highly interconnected. Different actors appear and take on the practices of other actors, which are then modified and reproduced. As this happens, the information infrastructure expands.

As described in Article IV, the collaborative fact-checking initiative Faktiskt involved multiple major Swedish news outlets in a unified attempt to combat the spread of inaccurate information before the Swedish election of 2018. However, although uniting a number of organizations in a common cause, the article shows that the initiative was not entirely smoothly integrated within the Swedish news media landscape. Instead, as one opinion piece quoted in the article indicates, discursive struggles took place as the new fact-checking network emerged and expanded.

The way this [fact-]checking association [i.e., Faktiskt] is being presented gives the impression that it is the elite media's common effort—i.e., one single voice that should say exactly what is true or false. That it is partly nationally funded undoubtedly contributes to the suspicion.

(Article IV, p. 133)

According to Shove et al. (2015), infrastructural developments often give rise to struggles. This claim is supported by the results of this thesis, which found similar struggles in the study of an emerging infrastructure relating to content moderation. In the context of content moderation, such a struggle can be recognized in the appearance of #JagÄrHär. One interviewed journalist mentioned that the activities of #JagÄrHär had not had a consistently positive effect on the discussion climate in the comments sections; there were also some negative consequences. Although #JagÄrHär's contribution had led to an increased and positive focus on gender issues, it had also led to an increased need for content moderation. According to this journalist, the organization's members had started spamming comments sections, and often their posts had to be removed.

To summarize, this study found that the practices of content moderation and their related discourses evolve in tandem with the underlying material and immaterial structure of the combating of misconduct in comment sections. The intertwinement of practices and discourses in this underlying and immaterial structure is an essential underpinning for how bundles of practices, discourses, and infrastructures evolve within the information landscape. The findings further underline how different technological and human infrastructures incorporated in practice-discourse-bundles support and connect with one another in the information landscape.

6.4. Genres as typified rhetorical action

The fourth research question, which asked *how news media genres emerge through journalists' enactment of information practices*, has guided the analysis of the typification of the journalists' work to combat the spread of misinformation.

Many scholars have used the word “genre” when referring to contemporary fact-checking (Coddington et al., 2014; Graves, 2016, 2017, 2018; Lowrey, 2017). Graves and Anderson (2020), for example, used the term to describe the practice as “a new genre of journalism” (p. 344). These scholars use the word in the literary sense, which understands genre as a sort of “category” or “type” of journalism. However, as pointed out in the theory chapter, the word “genre” can also be used to denote a rhetorical action. As argued by Miller (1984), whose seminal work “Genre as social action” has inspired the genre approach in information studies, the term “genre” is not very useful in a theoretical sense if it only refers to a category. Instead, Miller suggested that it can be used to represent typified rhetorical action, which is the focus of Article III in particular.

In this thesis, a genre is understood to be a typified response to a certain situation and, in this context, that situation is the spread of misinformation understood as a problem. The fact that the response is typified implies that it has taken some sort of material form. In addition, Article III argues that various other challenges that the news media faces have also contributed to the emergence of fact-checking as a genre. An example of this, the article finds, is the notion that public trust in the news media is declining. In response to this, the news media engages in various activities intended to reestablish the trust perceived to have been lost.

As suggested in the theory chapter, genres give material form to discourses and practices as well as to the various things that come with them, such as infrastructural arrangements. This means that the fact-checking genre does not merely contain the practice of evaluating public claims; it also contains material expressions of the practice, for example, the rating systems that some fact-checkers apply and the forms of the websites that they use as publishing

platforms. Therefore, the websites of Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact, which are analyzed in Article III, constitute a particular form of communication that fact-checkers use in their daily work.

When analyzing the content on the three fact-checking organizations' websites, three discursive themes emerged. As mentioned in the previous section, each of the three themes, that is, *access*, *trust*, and *information poverty*, has discursive properties, and they were all found to underpin the fact-checking genre. The study found that *access* is crucial to how fact-checkers present their content. To make their fact-checking accessible to the public, the fact-checks were made easy to read and digest, and other information on the websites was also made easy to understand. For example, as described in the study, the text of a fact-check is typically structured in a way that makes it less dense and easier to "skim" or "scan." Bullet points are common in this kind of text. Likewise, the websites on which the fact-checks are published are made easy to navigate and colorful symbols are employed to help users find information.

The practice of providing methodological accounts of their own work is not typical of most traditional news outlets. Instead, this practice is somewhat reminiscent of how scholars in academia work. Scholars are expected to account for how they, in their research, have followed good research practice. Academic work traditions were also found to play a role in the emergence of a contemporary fact-checking practice. In other words, journalists and scholars have traditionally relied on different practices to show how the product of their work is reliable and truthful.

As noted in Article III, traditional news reporters produce "truth" through the accuracy of their reporting, while fact-checkers' "truth" is established through the quality of their assessment of the claim being fact-checked. Although the methods of establishing truth vary, Article III found that values and beliefs that are known to be representative of the news media in general are equally representative of fact-checking. As illustrated in this thesis, fact-checkers construct a perception of themselves as advocates of truth. For example, by labeling their rating system "Truth-O-Meter," PolitiFact, at least rhetorically, claims to have the power to measure the truth, which is not exactly a humble ambition. This ambition and the idea of fact-checking as the guardian of truth (Uscinski & Butler, 2013) are aligned well with the news media's self-perception of being crucial to the upholding of the democratic principles that underpin Western societies, and the spreading of misinformation has often been conceptualized as something that endangers those principles (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Brown, 2018; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Pickard, 2019).

Trust was also found to be an important element of how the fact-checkers construct what they do. All the fact-checking websites were found to provide thorough accounts of their work practices. The example used in Article III illustrates how the work method accounts provided by fact-checkers serve the

purpose of making their work practices more transparent, and transparency serves to establish trust. People need to trust the organization behind a fact-check in order to believe the fact-check. This means that fact-checkers need to establish trust to make an impact because of the assumption that there has been a decline in the public's trust of the news media. This declining public trust in the news media in recent years has been observed in the literature (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Wise & McLaughlin, 2016).

People need to trust the fact-checkers in order to believe the results of their work. This also means that the fact-checkers' ability to successfully counteract misinformation needs to be trusted. Specific work practices such as providing method accounts for the sake of transparency are part of how fact-checking is constructed as an effective weapon against the spread of misinformation. The three organizations Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact have structured their texts in such a way that the results of the fact-check are easy to find, and their article headlines usually inform readers of the results before they read the article. Two of the three examined fact-checkers (Snopes and PolitiFact) also applied rating systems with colorful symbols that make the results of their fact-checks even easier to recognize. While FactCheck did not apply such a rating system, it did apply menus with app-like buttons containing graphic symbols that make their website very easy to navigate. An example of this mentioned in Article III is the blue button that leads the reader to FactCheck's subsection SciCheck. This particular button depicts the kind of glassware flask found in research laboratories. The mentioned graphic symbols and particular text structures are examples of rhetorical responses that have taken material form. In other words, the information practices and discourses on how and why things are done in certain ways are materialized in the form of the typified rhetorical response to the problem of the spreading of misinformation that we know contemporary fact-checking to be.

Through the actions taken by communities in response to perceived threats to society and themselves, genres emerge (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). The fact-checking genre has emerged in response to the spread of misinformation being perceived as a threat, and declining trust in the news media has contributed to shaping the form that this response has taken. Genres, according to Bazerman (2002), lead to social change and produce and strengthen a collective self-perception (Foscarini, 2015). In accordance with Miller's (1984) notion of genre, the content published on the three fact-checking organizations' websites that was analyzed in Article III is conceptualized as comprising typified components (Andersen, 2015a; McKenzie, 2015) of a rhetorical action that is recurrent and used for the purpose of counteracting the impact that misinformative claims are assumed to have.

By applying the already discussed rating systems for evaluating claims and by structuring their texts in new and particularly easy-to-read ways, journalists strive to make their reports transparent and digestible for a broad audience. It

is also when these features become typified, recurrent, and generally accepted and recognized that a new genre has emerged.

Although, in this thesis, the genre concept has only been applied explicitly to the study of contemporary fact-checking in Article III, it is possible to draw certain conclusions regarding content moderation as a rhetorical genre on the basis of articles I and II. The journalists interviewed for this thesis tended to talk about comments sections as making a useful contribution to their journalism and as a new way of doing what they have always done, i.e., giving people a voice. Because journalists have found that some of the user-generated content in comments sections threatens the very ideals that the comments sections were created to support, they have reacted by engaging in content moderation. Through their work with comments sections, policies have been developed and new routines for responding to users have been shaped and negotiated within the landscape of digital journalism. These new ways of conducting content moderation have emerged in response to a certain situation, just as fact-checking has emerged in response to the need to correct misinformation that is being spread. As seen in Article I, journalists often explained the importance of comments sections by referring to their professional obligations. Listening to the public voice is what journalism is about, the interviewees claimed, and interacting with their audience was important to an open society and was understood to bring value to journalism.

Articles I and II, which investigated content moderation, provide multiple explicit cues and, as such, a reasonably firm basis for characterizing it in terms of genre. There are advantages in doing so, especially for understanding how and why it has emerged and for understanding its role in the formation of the information landscape of digital journalism. After all, the maintenance of comments sections is just as much a genre as is contemporary fact-checking.

As seen in Article II, in the case of #JagÄrHär and Interaktiv Säkerhet, new practices and actors produced through the news media's practice of maintaining comments sections are not always very visible, and some of the actors often enact their practices under the radar. Although a company such as Interaktiv Säkerhet emerged as a direct consequence of the practice of having comments sections that need content moderation, its presence is less visible to the public eye. Also, the loosely organized activities of #JagÄrHär's members in social media comments sections may not be as easily recognized as genre activities as are the institutionalized activities of a company such as PolitiFact. However, just as PolitiFact's activities have occurred in response to the problem of people spreading misinformation, the use of the hashtag #JagÄrHär has occurred in response to the problem of people behaving in ways considered inappropriate.

In the cases of both content moderation and fact-checking, the continued enactment of typified responses leads to the creation of durable institutional genres. The former may appear less official as a genre in its own right as it is more integrated with digital journalism in general, as opposed to being

connected to independent actors who have specialized in enacting content moderation in public, such as the fact-checking organizations Snopes, FactCheck, and PolitiFact; it is also enacted by independent actors such as hired content moderators, as was discussed in Article II.

As the rating systems applied by some fact-checkers have been adapted by other fact-checkers around the world and hashtagging has become a popular form of activism, these practices have become more typified and durable than practices in general are. Just as fact-checkers engage in fact-checking by, for example, applying materialized responses such as rating systems, content moderators also apply typified responses in the form of, for example, hashtags or a particular kind of “anti-inflammatory” language. An example of the former was mentioned in Article II, which discusses the organization #JagÄrHär’s way of responding to perceived misconduct in comments sections, and an example of the latter is found in Article I, which quotes one journalist who mentioned how they counteracted inflammatory speech:

There’s a kind of language you can use, I find. “You may have a point there.” Right? That is not you conceding that this person’s criticism is fair or even true but it’s also you saying, you know ... “you may have a point,” and that’s a calming kind of approach. The main thing is not to inflame. It can get inflamed so quickly.

(Article I, p. 702)

This means that just as the continuous enactment of typified and materialized forms of action helps shape and sustain the genre of contemporary fact-checking, it also helps reinforce a shared understanding of why it is meaningful to engage in fact-checking (cf. Foscarini, 2015). Also, the repeated enactment of the various activities that make up content moderation reinforces a shared ideology, i.e., a common worldview, and an understanding of why things should be done in certain ways (cf. Smart, 2006).

6.5. Conclusions

This thesis has raised fundamental questions about how journalists and news media professionals understand and act upon the problems of misbehaving users and misinformation being spread. The thesis also shows how journalists' practices evolve into genres, i.e., typified responses, that emerge from bundles of practices, discourses, and infrastructures that occur within the information landscape of digital journalism, which, in turn, is situated in a broader news media landscape.

The four studies included in this thesis found that the emerging information practices of content moderation and contemporary fact-checking are deeply entwined with the idea of what journalists understand that they are supposed to do professionally. It shows that journalists draw on the moral values, traditions, and notions of what it means to be a journalist when enacting practices and discourses that legitimize their work with comments sections and fact-checking. The reasons why journalists engage in the information practices of the content moderation of comments sections and fact-checking are negotiated between different journalistic principles that are embedded in and acted out through the practices, discourses, and infrastructures of journalistic work. However, the same principles can also be applied as arguments either for or against journalists' engagement in specific practices. For example, the practice of maintaining comments sections is constructed both as something that strengthens democracy and as something that damages democracy. Regardless of whether an argument is for or against strict content moderation or for or against journalists taking on the work of fact-checking public claims, the thesis shows that the concept of democracy is recurrently used to explain and legitimize the argument.

Drawing on a framework that combines the five concepts of *information landscape*, *information practice*, *discourse*, *information infrastructure*, and *genre*, this thesis has contributed to a better understanding of the processes through which new practices emerge and take shape within the specific news media environment of our contemporary information age. It is important to bear in mind that the reasons for selecting the specific theoretical approaches applied here are very much based on how the studied problems are understood by the author. As both content moderation and fact-checking constitute forms of saying and doing, investigating practices and discourses seemed to be a logical first step. Taking advantage of these two perspectives in the investigation was a starting point when entering into this research project. After having looked closer at the two practices, it soon became evident that the context in which content moderation and fact-checking occur is important for how they are enacted. Therefore, investigating the link between the practices and discourses, and the specific landscape of digital journalism seemed an obvious next step in the study. Through the interviews with journalists and news media professionals for articles I and II, it became clear

how entwined the different ways of doing and saying things are. Therefore, a theoretical perspective was needed that could capture the underlying structure that keeps different practices, material elements, and immaterial elements together with one another and with the landscape in which they occur. Information infrastructure is one such perspective. Likewise, as it became clear how standardized, for example, the forms of language used for responding to users in comments sections and the rating systems used by fact-checkers are, genre provided a further useful perspective in this investigation. It enabled an explanation of how practice and discourse emerge as materialized and typified forms of action.

Although all these perspectives are useful for understanding and explaining the emergence of information practices within their specific contexts, it must be recalled that they are nothing more than just perspectives. There are, of course, other perspectives and other ways of exploring and explaining what media professionals do when they respond to user posts in comments sections or fact-check “news” such as online rumors.

Overall, this thesis found that the reasons for doing things in specific ways are much more complex than they may first seem. They are also much more complex than they generally appear in previous research. The study suggests that there is an ongoing struggle between the ideals behind content moderation and fact-checking. The reasons for engaging in the practices are, in other words, grounded in conflicting motives. Although the literature on content moderation and fact-checking observes that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to the practices, and that those who engage in them have opposing ideas about them, it is not clear just how entwined the conflicting ideas on the practices, discussions of them, and motives behind them really are. It is not just a matter of being either for or against something, or even of being a bit of both. In fact, the same arguments were often used to explain and justify completely opposing actions. Likewise, the same practices and genres were often legitimized by different principles.

This thesis demonstrates that there are no predetermined solutions to the perceived problems of challenging user behavior or to the spreading of misinformation; what we do and how we act are very much the result of negotiations between different ideological ideals of how things are supposed to be, rather than, for example, technological possibilities. Technology certainly plays a role in shaping practices, discourses, genres, and infrastructures, but it is by no means determinant for how content moderation and fact-checking are conducted.

Although the literature shows that a certain naiveté regarding the power of technology seems to have prevailed during the early days of the web, no such feelings could be found in relation to the tools used in either of the practices examined here. Instead, the data suggest that there is caution regarding technological innovations, such as social media platforms, and the motivations behind them. Although the literature offers suggestions for how technological

strategies could be used in the battle against vitriolic speech or the spreading of misinformation, nothing suggests that journalists imagine that technology could provide a solution to either of the problems.

One of the more interesting findings of the study is the lack of divergence between how media professionals in different countries talked and wrote about their work with content moderation and fact-checking. This suggests further questions. Although practices are local in nature and limited to specific communities, no striking divergence in how these practices are understood was found between the interviewees, or in the analyzed website content and newspaper articles. Although some journalists, for example, opposed the outsourcing of content moderation while others were in favor of it, and some were in favor of comments on social media while others were more skeptical, such opposing opinions could not be explained by their different nationalities. In fact, similar conflicting ideas about why things needed to be done in certain ways were expressed everywhere.

Still, the similarity of discourses and practices may not be surprising. The media professionals interviewed for articles I and II confirmed that they looked to other news outlets for inspiration on how to act in various situations. One interviewee, for example, referred to *The Washington Post* as a source of inspiration for how to manage comments sections. Also, the interface and rating systems of Snopes and PolitiFact studied in Article III have clearly inspired fact-checkers around the world. These findings are interesting and raise questions regarding the implications that such unified ways of doing and understanding practices have on a broader social level. What happens when everyone manages and thinks about information in the same way? How will a unified way of managing information processes affect our understanding of the problems inherent in systematic strategies for communicating and presenting news to the public? What implications will this have for our news media culture and for broader society?

Challenging these questions is an entirely different and equally important set of questions regarding the implications of granting equal social status to information channels that cannot be evaluated by the same standards. In a post-factual society, in which problems caused by the spread of misinformation are real, we should pay attention to the social consequences of information channels and media outlets whose practices are underpinned by entirely different ideals from those of truth and accuracy. Also, what are the long-term implications of the fragmentation of the news media landscape and of its practices and infrastructures?

These are questions that we must ask ourselves. In an information society, the news media undoubtedly has an important role to play, and it is important that we consider what that role is and how it is shaped and changed by those who perform practices such as content moderation and fact-checking, as these practices are increasingly taken for granted.

7. Sammanfattning (Swedish summary)

Denna avhandling utforskar hur journalister utövar två specifika informationspraktiker som båda har växt fram parallellt med att journalistiken i allt högre grad har digitaliserats. Praktikerna – moderering av kommentarsfält på nätet samt faktagranskning av påståenden som i hög grad sprids på internet – har tagit form inom dagens medielandskap och blivit en del av detta.

Avhandlingens syfte är att belysa hur journalisters sätt att hantera kommentarsfält på nätet och att faktagranska har kommit att bli en del av ett digitalt journalistiskt informationslandskap. Mer specifikt avser avhandlingen att öka kunskapen om hur stötande användarkommentarer till nyhetsartiklar och problemet med desinformation har bidragit till att skapa nya informationspraktiker.

Två av avhandlingens delstudier fokuserar på journalisters moderering av kommentarsfält till nyhetsartiklar på nätet och två på faktagranskning.

7.1. Artikel I

Avhandlingens första delstudie syftar till att belysa hur professionella praktiker, som uppstått för att hantera stötande inlägg i kommentarsfält till nyhetsartiklar på nätet, har utvecklats i ett digitalt nyhetsjournalistiskt informationslandskap.

I studien genomfördes tio semi-strukturerade intervjuer med journalister från fyra olika länder – Sverige, Danmark, Tyskland och Kanada – om deras arbete med att moderera kommentarsfält under nyhetsartiklar som publicerats på nätet. I undersökningen tillämpades en variant av praktikteori för att förklara hur journalister resonerar kring sitt arbete med att bemöta användare i kommentarsfält. Det teoretiska ramverket är inspirerat av Lloyds informationslandskapsbegrepp, vilket är ett begrepp som teoretiserar den miljö journalisterna verkar inom. I den här studien användes informationslandskapet som en förklaringsmodell för hur journalisters upplevelser och erfarenheter medverkar till att informationspraktiker förändras och utvecklas inom en specifik kontext.

Artikeln belyser betydelsen av hur normer, värderingar och ideologier, liksom regler och känslor, är avgörande för hur journalister uppfattar vad det är de gör när de arbetar med kommentarsfält.

Artikeln visar också att journalister i hög grad stödjer sig på samma ideologiska resonemang när de förklarar helt olika sätt att hantera användarkommentarer. Exempelvis kunde de intervjuade journalisterna använda främjandet av demokratiska principer såsom yttrandefrihet som argument både för och emot en strikt moderering av kommentarsfält. Det framgår även att den gemenskap som journalister uppfattar att de är en del av och som påverkar hur de förstår sina arbetsuppgifter inte är särskilt beroende av utövarnas geografiska hemvist eller specifika organisationstillhörighet. Istället har det nationsöverskridande informationslandskapet, som journalisterna är en del av, större betydelse för hur de uppfattar sitt uppdrag.

7.2. Artikel II

Avhandlingens andra delstudie syftar till att skapa förståelse för hur vitt skilda praktiker för att bemöta problemet med stötande användarbeteenden i kommentarsfält till nyhetsartiklar är sammanvävda i en dynamisk mediestruktur.

Studiens empiriska material utgjordes av samma semi-strukturerade intervjuer som låg till grund för avhandlingens första delstudie. I studien analyserades tio intervjuer med journalister från fyra olika länder. Analysens fokus låg på journalisternas berättelser om hur deras arbetsmetoder påverkar andra aktörer, som också verkar inom kommentarsfälten, bemöter användarkommentarer som av dem uppfattas som stötande.

I artikeln används informationsinfrastruktur som teoretiskt begrepp för att ringa in hur praktiker bidrar till nya arbetssätt och mediestrukturer.

Några av de praktiker som ingår i strukturen, t.ex. moderering av användarkommentarer och hashtagging, förefaller vid ett första ögonkast att ha mycket lite gemensamt. Drivkrafterna till varför olika aktörer engagerar sig i kommentarsfält skiljer sig också åt och i kommentarsfälten möts vitt skilda aktörer och praktiker som har en sak gemensamt, nämligen att de uppkommit som en reaktion på att vissa användarkommentarer ibland uppfattas som stötande.

Snarare än att förändring skapas av enskilda aktörer belyser artikeln att en mångfasetterad struktur av olika praktiker bidrar till förändring genom att de verkar i relation till varandra.

7.3. Artikel III

Avhandlingens tredje delstudie syftar till att skapa förståelse för faktagranskning som en samtida journalistisk genre. I undersökningen bidrog genrebegreppet till att förklara hur tre amerikanska faktagranskningsorganisationer arbetar med sina webbsidor.

I studien analyserades innehåll från Snopes, FactChecks och PolitiFacts webbsidor. Materialet bestod av ett urval av faktagranskningar och visuella element som publicerats på organisationernas webbsidor under två olika perioder. Materialinsamlingen ägde rum vid två tillfällen med sex månaders mellanrum under corona-pandemin (den 18 till 23 mars respektive 22 till 28 september 2020). På så sätt utgjordes en stor del av materialet av rapporter relaterade till covid-19. Analysen av materialet fokuserade på hur faktagranskarna kommunicerade sina utlåtanden visuellt och textuellt.

Studien fann att faktagranskarnas arbetsprocesser, metoder och sätt att kommunicera i hög grad har kommit att bli typifierade. Ett exempel på ett typifierat arbetssätt är de värderingssystem som uppkommit för att betygssätta sanningshalten i de påståenden som faktagranskas. Ofta använder sig faktagranskare av färgglada symboler för att utvärdera och visualisera sina utlåtanden. Andra exempel är de tydliga och vägledande rubriker som informerar läsarna om utslaget av en faktagranskning innan de läst artikeln samt de lättillgängliga artikelstrukturer som kännetecknar faktagranskningarna.

Artikeln belyser hur de uttryck som faktagranskningsgenren tar sig har formats av förekomsten av olika behov inom dagens informationslandskap. Exempelvis har uppfattningen om att det finns ett behov av att återskapa ett förlorat eller skadat förtroende för nyhetsmedier hos allmänheten bidragit till att utforma nya metoder för att på ett transparent sätt kommunicera vad det är faktagranskare gör. Även om de värderingar och föreställningar som dominerar traditionella nyhetsmediediskurser återfinns i ett faktagransknings-sammanhang har också föreställningar, som annars är kännetecknande för ett akademiskt arbetssätt, fått betydelse för hur faktagranskarna arbetar. Tillsammans har dessa värderingar bidragit till att ge upphov till en ny journalistisk genre som skiljer sig åt från andra nyhetsgenrer. Denna nya genre har införlivats i en samtida nyhetskultur och bidrar i sin tur till att påverka och förändra det journalistiska informationslandskapet.

7.4. Artikel IV

Avhandlingens fjärde delstudie syftar till att belysa hur en samtida faktagranskningspraktik konstrueras diskursivt i svenska nyhetsmedier och till att åskådliggöra ideologiska föreställningar och värderingar om faktagranskning i samhället. I undersökningen analyserades ett urval texter som publicerats i två av Sveriges största morgontidningar och olika diskurser som kännetecknar hur faktagranskning framställs i svensk nyhetsmedia identifierades. Studien utgick från Faircloughs kritiska diskursteori (CDA). Genom tillämpning av ett diskursteoretiskt tillvägagångssätt gjorde studien vissa teoretiska ställningstaganden som har att göra med språkets sociala betydelse. En utgångspunkt i studien är till exempel att språket är meningsskapande och bidrar till att forma hur människor handlar och förhåller sig till världen omkring dem.

I studien identifierades tre övergripande diskurser som kontrasterar och motsäger varandra. Den första förhåller sig positiv till faktagranskning och bejakar de arbetssätt som ingår i praktiken. Den andra diskursen förhåller sig negativ till faktagranskning och bestrider bland annat att det skulle vara en effektiv arbetsmetod för att bekämpa desinformation. Slutligen identifierades en tredje diskurs som på engelska benämndes "the agency discourse". Denna diskurs reflekterar olika uppfattningar om aktörernas roll i faktagranskningen och föreställningar om vem som bör ta på sig ansvaret för att bekämpa spridning av felaktig och missvisande information.

Samtliga diskurser rymmer flera underdiskurser. Den första diskursen rymmer exempelvis två underdiskurser varav den ena reflekterar uppfattningar om faktagranskning som ett botemedel mot desinformation och den andra uppfattningar om faktagranskning som en metod att fastslå vad som är sant och ett sätt att upprätthålla objektivitet. Inom den andra diskursen identifierades tre stycken underdiskurser. Den första ifrågasätter faktagranskning som ett effektivt verktyg i kampen mot desinformation. Den andra underdiskursen reflekterar föreställningar om att faktagranskning skulle kunna vara skadligt för demokratin och den tredje en oro över att praktiken skulle kunna bidra till att legitimera och ytterligare befästa konspirationsteorier. Inom den tredje övergripande diskursen identifierades två underdiskurser. Den ena etablerar faktagranskning som ett journalistiskt åtagande och den andra reflekterar föreställningar om den roll sociala medier spelar eller bör spela i arbetet med att faktagranska information som sprids på nätet.

Studien fann att olika diskurser överlappar varandra och att flera av dem står i direkt konflikt med varandra. Artikeln visar även att faktagranskning i mycket hög grad är politiserad. Det framgår också att uppfattningarna om faktagranskning är betydligt mer komplexa än vad de ger intryck av att vara i den växande forskningslitteratur som undersöker ämnet.

7.5. Slutsatser

Avhandlingen visar att de två undersökta informationspraktikerna – moderering av kommentarsfält och faktagranskning – är sammanflätade med journalistiska normer och värderingar samt med de sätt på vilka journalister uppfattar sitt uppdrag. Efterhand som praktikerna har tagit form har de vävts in i journalisternas uppdrag på ett sådant sätt att de blivit en del av dagens journalistiska informationslandskap. Avhandlingen visar också att de sätt på vilka praktikerna utövas har uppstått genom en förhandlingsprocess där olika journalistiska principer ställs mot varandra. Exempelvis vägs demokratiska principer om yttrandefrihet mot journalistisk kvalitet i en diskussion om hur användarkommentarer och desinformation ska hanteras och bemötas. De motiv som driver journalister att engagera sig i moderering av användarkommentarer och faktagranskning kännetecknas av en spänning mellan olika handlingsalternativ. Det framkommer exempelvis att motiven bakom journalisternas val att inlemma de två praktikerna i sin yrkesutövning är mycket mer komplexa än vad de vid en första anblick ger sken av att vara. De sätt på vilka problemen med aggressivt användarbeteende och spridning av desinformation hanteras är långt ifrån givna och de är i högsta grad förhandlingsbara.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Example of an interview guide

Phase 1: Introductions

- I introduce myself and thank the interviewee for their time.
- I inform the interviewee about the research project, the purpose of the study, and how I am going to use the data.
- I make sure that their participation is voluntarily.
- I inform them that their individual participation will be anonymous.
- I make sure that the interviewee approves of my mentioning the name of their news outlet in the published study, and I inform them that the news outlet will not be referred to directly in connection with any interview quotations.
- The interviewee is asked to introduce themselves and to tell me about their background, for example, education, work experience, their role in the company, and how long they have been working for [name of news outlet].

Phase 2: Main part of the interview

On social media in general:

- When did you start working with social media at [name of news outlet]?
- Do you remember anything in particular about the time when [name of news outlet] started using social media or what your work was like at that time?
- Do you remember when your news outlet started to use Facebook or how you used it at the beginning?
- How long has there been a social media team at [name of news outlet]?
- Would you like to tell me about how and when your social media team was set up?
- Are you currently restructuring your working methods or do you feel that you have found good routines that work for you?

- How do you find that the ways you use social media work for [name of news outlet]?
- Is there anything about your work with social media in general that you would like to change?
- Obviously, there was a time before social media. Do you know when [name of news outlet] went online and could you tell me anything about that time?¹

On comments sections:

- An interesting difference between the news outlets that I have studied is whether they provide comments sections on their own websites or only on social media. [Name of news outlet] used to provide comments sections on its own website but no longer does so. Today, users have the option of commenting on your news articles on Facebook instead. Do you remember the discussions you had before removing comments sections from your own website and why you decided to remove them?
- When and why did you start to provide users with comments sections on Facebook?
- How do you find that the comments sections work on Facebook as opposed to how they worked before when they were on your own website?
- Do you have any thoughts about who the people are that participate in discussing news in your comments sections?

On user behavior in comments sections:

- Is it your impression that users discuss news in a different way in the comments sections on social media as opposed to how they used to discuss it on your own website?
- Are people more or less active now and have you noticed whether there is a difference in the tone of the discussions?
- What kinds of user posts do you perceive to be problematic? When do you decide to remove a user post?
- What do you think are the users' motives for posting aggressive or hurtful comments?
- Nowadays, we hear a lot about bots being active in comments sections. Do you have the impression that this is a problem?

¹ This question was difficult since many of the interviewees had not been working as journalists when news outlets first started to set up web presences, and those who had had often not been working at the same news outlet. Only two of the interviewees were able to respond to this question.

- What are the news topics that receive the most comments in your comments sections?
- Which topics result in particularly heated discussions?
- Have you yourself ever felt personally targeted by offensive user posts? Would you like to tell me about any particular situation and how you felt about it?

On content moderation:

- Would you like to walk me through how you manage and respond to users in your comments sections?
- Have your methods of conducting content moderation changed now that the comments are on social media rather than on your own website?
- How have your methods of conducting content moderation changed in the years that you have been engaged in it?
- Can you think of anything that you used to do differently in terms of your work with comments sections when they were on your own website as opposed to now that they are on Facebook? Do you invest more or less time in this today?
- Do you handle sensitive news topics differently from less sensitive news topics when it comes to how you conduct content moderation?
- Do you sometimes have to shut down comments sections entirely? Could you give me an example of when that has happened?
- When your news outlet responds to a user in a comments section, I've noticed that the moderator ends their post by signing it with their own name, that is, their first name and surname. Why do you think this is a good way to respond to users?
- What do you think are the most important things that you have learned from your work with comments sections?

On outsourced content moderation:

- Do you engage external content moderation services?
- How long has [name of news outlet] been outsourcing content moderation?
- How well does engaging external content moderators work for you?
- Does the content moderation that the external company performs differ from your own in-house content moderation?
- Do you remember anything from the discussions you had before you decided to engage external content moderation services or what it was that made you decide to engage these services?

Phase 3: Wrap-up and closure of the interview

- Some of this interview has been concerned with questions about your experience of migrating comments sections from your own website to Facebook and the challenges that this transfer involved. Now, I was wondering if you could tell me anything about the challenges that lie ahead of you?
- Do you have any ideas about how you would like user participation to look in the future?
- How do you think that users will interact over news in the future?
- Is there anything that you feel I have failed to ask you? Or maybe there is something important about your work that you feel has been left out?

Appendix 2: Example of an initial contact email

Dear Sir or Madam:²

My name is Amalia Juneström, and I am a PhD student in information studies at Uppsala University. As part of my research project, I am looking into the ways news organizations in different countries handle issues that relate to offensive user behavior in news media comments sections, for example, aggressive user posts in comments sections on social media.

It would be very helpful if you could assist me in getting in touch with someone at [name of news outlet] who is engaged in dealing with such issues or if you could let me know whom to contact.

Thank you very much in advance!

Kind regards,
Amalia

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PhD Student
Department of ALM | Institutionen för ABM
Uppsala University | Uppsala universitet

² If the email was in Swedish, a less formal address was used.

