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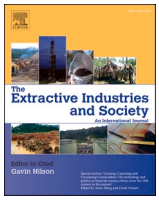

Contested futures: Media, social cohesion, and the Kaunisvaara mine in Swedish public discourse 2006-2024

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how national and regional media discourses have constructed the Kaunisvaara iron mine in Pajala, northern Sweden, between 2006 and 2024. Through a critical discourse analysis of 57 articles from the national *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and 872 from the regional *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD), the study traces six discursive phases that reflect shifting representations of industrial development, environmental responsibility, and territorial legitimacy. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis reveals how DN and NSD produced divergent yet overlapping narratives—shaped by editorial position, institutional scale, and regional proximity. DN's coverage transitioned from developmental optimism to sustainability critique, while NSD consistently foregrounded local identity, economic hope, and regional pride, albeit sometimes at the expense of environmental or indigenous perspectives. Rather than treating media as neutral observers, the article emphasizes their role in shaping symbolic imaginaries and ideological framings of extractive futures. By situating the Kaunisvaara case within broader European debates on resource policy and rural transformation, the study shows how media discourses negotiate contested meanings of progress, justice, and belonging in the context of post-industrial peripheries.

1. Introduction

The Kaunisvaara iron mine in Pajala offers a compelling case of rural reindustrialization in post-recession Sweden, revealing how industrial ventures are embedded in contested narratives of identity, development, and resilience. Following decades of population decline, structural unemployment, and diminishing public services, the mine's arrival in the late 2000s was framed by local and national actors as a potential turning point—both economically and symbolically. As documented in the research program *From Recession to Success* (Waara et al., 2025), the Kaunisvaara project exemplifies how extractive industry investments can reignite rural imaginaries of future viability, self-reliance, and regional integration. However, the trajectory of the mine—its initial promise, subsequent collapse, and partial revival—also underscores the fragility and complexity of such transitions.

In the municipality of Pajala, mining became more than an economic intervention: it functioned as a catalyst for identity renegotiation, intergenerational tensions, and competing visions of development. This multifaceted context makes the Kaunisvaara mine a compelling case through which to examine not only the material dynamics of extractive industries, but also the discursive, emotional, and political landscapes that shape rural transformation.

As media plays a central role in framing public understanding of such projects, this article analyses how regional and national newspapers has discursively constructed the mine over two decades. As shown in media studies literature (Couldry, 2008; Olausson, 2011), media both reflect and shape public discourse, influencing how different audiences—ranging from local communities to national stakeholders—perceive the legitimacy, risks, and promises of industrial development. In this study, "the public" refers primarily to newspaper readers and policy audiences in Sweden, including both regional residents and national actors. The analysis reflects broader societal narratives surrounding rural development, economic liberalism, environmental concerns, and to a certain degree also indigenous rights.

The setting of this analysis is twofold. First, the re-industrialization of rural and post-industrial communities poses complex challenges to maintaining social cohesion amid economic restructurings. Industrial booms and busts—especially those linked to mining—profoundly affect identity, belonging, and future imaginaries (understood as socially and discursively constructed visions of what the future ought to be,

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grounded in collective values and expectations). Second, media representations are crucial in constructing the discursive environments in which these communities are perceived and understood, both internally and externally. This article therefore integrates a brief literature review on social cohesion in rural transformation with a media analysis of a regional and a national newspapers representation of the Kaunisvaara mine. Drawing on empirical research from various global contexts—West Virginia, Canada, Peru, China, Bali, among others—the article explores how local identity, emotional attachment, and participatory practices sustain cohesion during industrial transformation. These themes resonate strongly with the media framing of the Kaunisvaara case, particularly regarding sustainability assessments and the evolving visions—both positive and negative—at different stages of the mine's development. These locations were selected to reflect a diverse set of empirical contexts—ranging from the Global North to the Global South—where extractive industries intersect with rural identity, transition, and social cohesion. The selection was guided by thematic relevance and citation prominence in recent comparative studies.

Eerola (2022) shows how Nordic mineral policy increasingly frames mining as central to technological sovereignty and the green transition. Sweden and Finland have embraced a "mining-friendly" stance linked to innovation and EU strategies such as the Raw Materials Initiative, which highlights northern Fennoscandia's resources as strategically underused (Internet, 2025). The reopening of the Kaunisvaara mine in 2018 reflects this discursive shift: the mine was reframed not just as local economic stimulus but as part of a broader European effort to secure mineral autonomy.

Kivinen et al. (2020), using data from the *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice*, demonstrate that new mining initiatives across the EU are often situated in peripheral regions like northern Sweden—areas marked by economic vulnerability and low political leverage. These contexts often experience socio-environmental contestation, with tensions around land use, decision-making, and ecological risks. Kaunisvaara exemplifies these dynamics, situating the case within a pan-European geography of extractive expansion, sustainability discourse, and localized resistance. It is thus not merely a Swedish case, but a node in broader debates about mining, legitimacy, and rural futures in the EU.

1.1. Contextual framing of social cohesion

Social cohesion—understood as mutual trust, shared identity, and collective efficacy—is central to community resilience in rural and post-industrial regions. In mining-dependent areas, such as Pajala, cohesion is closely tied to industrial identity, place attachment, and the emotional meanings ascribed to work and locality (Bell and York, 2010; Lockie et al., 2009). While extractive industries can foster pride and solidarity, they also risk reinforcing economic dependency and inhibiting diversification (Bole et al., 2022).

The discourse of the Kaunisvaara mine exemplifies this tension. As shown in the "From Recession to Success" project (Waara et al., 2025), mining can reanimate local imaginaries of future viability—but also provoke contestation around land use, sustainability, and community voice. Place-based identity and emotional attachment, reinforced through local narratives and rituals (Freire et al., 2015), shape how cohesion is maintained or strained during transformation. In peripheral regions with limited political leverage, such as northern Sweden, these dynamics are especially pronounced (Kivinen et al., 2020; Eerola, 2022).

Thus, social cohesion is not static but dynamically renegotiated across generations, shaped by both inherited narratives and emerging aspirations (Clendenning, 2024). In the case of Kaunisvaara, cohesion is not only a social condition but a discursive and emotional process—contingent on how futures are imagined, contested, and shared.

1.2. A narrative in the making

Norman Fairclough's theory of representation is grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), a multidisciplinary approach that examines how language, as a form of social practice, constructs and reflects social realities. Fairclough (1992, 2003) contends that representation is not a neutral process of mirroring the world, but a selective and ideologically charged act that constructs meaning in specific ways. Fairclough's model is particularly suited to this study as it allows for an integrated analysis of language, power, and ideology in shifting media discourses across spatial and institutional scales. By examining textual, discursive, and social dimensions, the analysis reveals how extractive futures are legitimized, questioned, and reimagined. In this view, texts—whether written, spoken, or visual—do not merely describe reality; they actively shape perceptions, reinforce power relations, and legitimize particular social structures.

At the core of Fairclough's model is the idea that discourse is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned. It constitutes social identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge, while simultaneously being shaped by broader social structures, institutions, and power dynamics. Representation, then, concerns how people, events, and practices are depicted through language, and how these depictions align with ideological and hegemonic interests. Fairclough identifies three interrelated levels of discourse analysis: (1) the textual level, focusing on linguistic features and structure; (2) the discursive practice level, concerning how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed; and (3) the social practice level, which relates discursive events to broader socio-political contexts (see Appendix 1). This framework allows for a systematic analysis of media discourses. At the textual level, analysts investigate lexical choices, modality, and agency distribution. At the level of discursive practice, the focus is on genre conventions, intertextuality, and the inclusion or exclusion of voices. At the level of social practice, the concern is with ideological frames, hegemonic narratives, and socio-political alignments.

Applied to the selected newspapers coverage of the mine in Kaunisvaara, Fairclough's model enables us to trace how the mine has been discursively positioned in relation to themes such as rural revitalization, economic liberalism, environmental justice, and indigenous rights. Also, the medias positions (national or regional) are taken into consideration in the analysis. While earlier research highlights the role of discourse in shaping cohesion (Bell and York, 2010; Lockie et al., 2009), this study contributes by demonstrating that media discourse around industrial projects not only reflects but differentiates imaginaries of social cohesion along national and regional axes. This shift mirrors broader contestations over mining in Sweden, where critical assessments of governance, legitimacy, and Sámi rights have increasingly politicized extractive policy debates (Beland Lindahl et al., 2023; Haikola and Anshelm, 2016; Ekenberg 2008).

2. Method

This study applies a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to peer-reviewed empirical studies that explore dimensions of community identity, industrial transformation, and rural social cohesion. These studies span multiple global regions and methodologies, including ethnography (Skeard, 2015), longitudinal impact assessment (Lockie et al., 2009), discourse analysis (Bell and York, 2010), and case studies on policy engagement (Dampier et al., 2014), and cultural heritage (Tan et al., 2018). In the literature review, thematic coding was used to extract cross-cutting themes related to social cohesion, including place identity, emotional climate, community participation, and intergenerational memory. Special attention was given to how studies conceptualize social cohesion, and the role of historical, economic, and cultural narratives in sustaining or undermining it.

The media analysis aims to uncover different angles in viewing reindustrialisation of a post-recession area in the far North of Sweden.

The newspapers in question are the national *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), meaning "Daily News," and the regional *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD), meaning the "Northern Social Democratic". DN is one of Sweden's most prominent and widely read daily newspapers. Founded in, 1864, it has been a significant voice in Swedish journalism for over 160 years. DN offers comprehensive coverage of national and international news, politics, culture, and the arts. The newspaper confirms to an independently liberal editorial stance. The newspaper attracts about 1.5 million unique visitors per week and is often regarded as Sweden's newspaper of record, known for its in-depth reporting and influential opinion pieces. It continues to play a vital role in shaping public discourse and providing reliable news coverage in Sweden. *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD) is a daily regional newspaper based in Luleå, Sweden, serving Norrbotten County. NSD was established in 1918 and created to represent the social democratic perspective in the region. The newspaper has maintained a social democratic editorial stance since its inception. NSD is published in a tabloid format and had a daily circulation of approximately 14,000 copies in 2024, yet the web-version reaches far more than this. NSD provides comprehensive coverage of local news, sports, culture, and opinion pieces relevant to the communities in Norrbotten. DN and NSD were selected for their national and regional scope, allowing comparison across institutional distance and discursive scale.

That said, the use of NSD introduces interpretive challenges. Its commercial ties to a readership demographically concentrated in Norrbotten's industrial workforce might encourage alignment with pro-industry perspectives, including relative underrepresentation of contesting interests such as environmental critiques and indigenous peoples land use. These tensions are acknowledged in the analysis, where NSD is shown to both facilitate regional cohesion and occasionally sideline dissenting voices. At the same time, this close alignment with local industrial and cultural narratives also constitutes a strength: it allows the analysis to access regionally embedded perspectives that are often marginalized in national debates. NSD's reporting provides a discursive window into how extractive development is narrated from within the community—anchored in lived experience, historical identification with industry, and place-based expectations. Rather than treating this as a limitation, the paper explores such editorial patterns as discursive practices reflective of regional socio-political dynamics.

The empirical material consists of 57 DN articles and 872 NSD articles published between 2006 and 2024. The selection of articles departures from the search term"Kaunisvaara" which is the name of the location of the newly established iron ore mine (open pit) in the municipality of Pajala. The search term'Kaunisvaara' was chosen to ensure specificity, however acknowledging the risk of omission. Cross-checks with broader terms ('Pajala AND mine', 'Northland', 'Kaunis Iron' [the company names]) confirmed that the Kaunisvaara keyword yielded the most relevant coverage across periods. Nonetheless, the reliance on this term may underrepresent generic mining discussions, particularly in the national DN, where coverage tends to frame extractive issues through broader national lenses—often without naming specific localities. In contrast, the regional NSD is more likely to use "Kaunisvaara" as a referent due to its proximity, regional orientation, and audience familiarity with the project. This limitation is acknowledged in the interpretation of the article frequencies. While public service media (radio and television) were excluded due to limited archival accessibility and inconsistent coverage volumes, future studies may integrate these sources for triangulation.

All articles within this *Kaunisvaara-frame* with any connection to the mining activity, direct or indirect has been the subject of enquiry. No formal distinction was made between editorials and reportage, though genre was coded thematically. The analysis covers six distinct time periods corresponding to key phases in the mine's trajectory: initial optimism, expansion, financial collapse, attempted revival, and ecological and legal controversies (Table 1). The selection allows for a longitudinal comparison of discursive shifts (Table 2). Data analysis follows Fairclough's CDA model, integrating coding of linguistic features, narrative structures, actor representation, and thematic framings. Special attention is given to how different voices and value systems are balanced over time.

The coding template is based on the conceptual framework outlined in Appendix 1, focusing on how the mine is represented, what values are articulated, who is given voice or silenced, and what temporalities are emphasized. The empirical analysis that follows traces these evolving discourses by using illustrative quotations and thematic coding to examine how NSD's and DN's coverage constructed the Kaunisvaara mine as a symbol of industrial promise, systemic failure, contested revival, and ecological reconsideration. In here the article aim to polarize the regional vs. the national perspective. Thus, this study does not empirically measure public opinion but examines the discursive structures within which public meaning-making is likely to occur, recognizing media as both a reflector and a constructor of symbolic narratives.

Fjellborg et al. (2022) map anti-extraction movements across Sweden and highlight the importance of local media in articulating grassroots concerns and regional interpretations of sustainability and justice. In their study, media emerges as a key platform for locally embedded, yet ambivalent, narratives—balancing support for industrial employment with critique of perceived asymmetries in land use. Beland Lindahl (2023) Beland Lindahl et al. (2018, 2023) further show how place-based perceptions shape preferred development pathways, indicating that regional media capture both cultural attachment and economic vulnerability. These perspectives contrast with national media's abstraction of local conflicts into national frames of growth and competitiveness.

The choice of DN and NSD is thus theoretically informed: DN reflects hegemonic national discourse, while NSD offers insights into regionally situated narratives shaped by proximity, identity, and lived experience. In Fairclough's (1992) terms, media are both shaped by and shape the institutional fields in which they operate. This dual lens enables a critical engagement with the multi-scalar constructions of legitimacy, cohesion, and risk in Sweden's extractive debates.

The number of articles in the regional newspaper is 15 times higher than the national newspaper reflecting different senses of urgency associated to the spatial location of the newspaper. The frequency of articles varies according to the distinct developmental periods of the mine. Most articles were produced during the preparatory years 2010–2012, during the financial instability and struggle for corporate survival in 2013–2014, and during the reconstruction phase 2017–2018.

Finally, the analysis does not treat newspapers as monolithic entities. Editorials, feature stories, and reportage were included in the coding and analysed for variation in genre, voice, and framing. The distinctions between these formats—though not systematized through genre-specific coding—are implicitly considered in the empirical analysis, especially where tone and source selection differ.

3. Result: contested futures – media representation of the mine in Kaunisvaara

The empirical material consists of 56 articles published in *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and 872 articles published in *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD) between 2006 and 2024, covering six key time periods. These periods correspond to significant phases in the life cycle of the Kaunisvaara mining project and reflect broader socio-political and economic contexts in Sweden. The material reveals distinct patterns in how DN and NSD has framed the mine—ranging from economic salvation and modernization to ecological critique and indigenous resistance (Table 1).

An overview of the dominant discursive themes in the reporting on the Kaunisvaara mine between 2006 and 2024 has been extracted through the analysis. It connects media narratives to key phases in the mine's development, decline, and potential revival, highlighting how

Table 1
Discursive phases in the Kaunisvaara mine establishment 2006 - 2024.

2006–2009: Technocratic optimism, industrial promise, absence of critique
2010–2012: Expansion narrative, logistical focus, municipal support
2013–2014: Financial Instability and Corporate Survival - Collapse and Emotional Fallout
2015–2017: Post crisis, Blame, Investigation, and Renewal
2018–2021: Environmental and legal critique, focus on indigenous impacts
2022–2024: Legitimacy debates, judicial decisions, sustainability discourses

language and framing reflect broader societal concerns and economic dynamics.

Across these phases, external factors significantly shaped the mine's trajectory and influenced public discourse. Fluctuations in global iron ore prices challenged the long-term feasibility of operations, particularly for a smaller competitor like Northland Resources and Kaunis Iron vis-à-vis the large mining company LKAB in close proximity to the Kaunisvaara mine. Logistical difficulties in transporting ore to the shipping port of Narvik (in the North of Norway) and delays in infrastructure investment added to operational risk. Labour availability in remote Pajala also featured increasingly in media narratives, particularly as the mine sought to scale up or restart production. These dynamics complicated the framing of the mine—not merely as a local initiative but as embedded in broader political-economic processes and structural constraint. The following phases have been identified:

2006–2009: Technocratic Optimism and Industrial Promise: In its earliest phase, DN's reporting adopted a predominantly optimistic tone. The Kaunisvaara mine was framed as a vehicle for rural revitalization and regional modernity. Bureaucratic milestones were portrayed as signs of progress, with minimal discussion of environmental or social risks. The tone was one of inevitability and enthusiasm. A headline from DN (2007–09–21) stated: "We have already pressed the start button" [1] conveying urgency and momentum. Employment effects were quantified, and local officials were quoted with clear optimism: "The [...] mine will provide work for between 150 and 200 people in the first stage …." Pajala's municipal leader Bengt Niska stated: "People have hope for the future." All in all, this framing underscored the mine as a symbol of hope and transformation while omitting voices concerned with long-term impacts, indigenous rights, or environmental considerations.

The textual level of NSD's reporting between 2006 and 2009 demonstrates a predominantly affirmative and locally engaged tone enhancing a largely supportive discourse, framed within regional revitalization and hopes of economic salvation. A gradual inclusion of critical perspectives can, however, be noted, but the overarching narrative remained one of industrial opportunity and regional rebirth. A clear regional tone runs through the coverage. The reporting is deeply embedded in societal concerns about rural depopulation, regional development, and economic survival. The future mine has a distinct connection to peoples plans: "We plan to expand but first I need to hear Northland's plans" [2] (NSD 2007–10–11). The discourse frequently juxtaposes the past (depicted as decay and depopulation) with a future of industrial modernity and rapid growth: "There is a rush here now. If the mine becomes a reality, they will have plenty of things to plan." (NSD 2007–10–30). Themes of border-crossing collaboration with Finland also reflect supranational ambitions aligning with EU regional funding and integration.

2010–2012: Expansion Narrative and Infrastructure Mobilization: During the expansion phase the narrative of mining-led development was reinforced. The mine was presented as a catalyst for regional growth, supported by infrastructure investments and political momentum. DN (2010–08–21) reported: "Pajala's mines will make sparsely populated areas flourish and give a boost to the entire [region]." While some scepticism appeared—such as a resident expressing doubt: "I doubt whether people will settle here. The environment will get worse" (DN 2010–05–29) — these perspectives were heavily subordinated a dominant discourse of economic optimism. DN's coverage largely centred on municipal leaders and company representatives, who framed the project as a modernizing force for a marginalized region. NSD's coverage during 2010–2012 is saturated with positive, often ceremonial language with a profound regional inclosing. Headlines feature emotive expressions like "A historic day" (2010–12–21) and "Time for something more noble" (2010–12–18) as well as: "This is a new era for Pajala and the [region]" (2010–12–21), framing the mining venture as a heroic regional breakthrough. Reporting is closely aligned with regional and industrial actors and political figures, as well as corporate leaders, are frequently refereed. The mine is being constructed as a response to decades of structural decline and outmigration in the area, promoting narratives of economic revival, demographic growth, and regional repositioning. Simultaneously, the material reflects national political ambitions—linking the mine to Sweden's export economy, rural policy, and infrastructure development: "It is a milestone, a historic day for Pajala, Norrbotten and all of Sweden" (NSD 2010–12–20). The affirmative narrative of the development is widened to encompass it as a transformative engine for all of Norrbotten.

2013–2014: Financial Instability and Corporate Survival - Collapse and Emotional Fallout: This period represents a turning point for the mine ending up in bankruptcy for the mining company *Northland Resources* in the late 2014. The two-year turmoil is well covered in DN where the discursive tone gradually shifted to one of caution and warnings. Technical and financial terminology—"reconstruction", "solvency", "liquidity problems"—began to dominate the narrative. A prominent and well known financial analyst Claes Hemberg argued: "12,000 small shareholders have been misled by the company's management, which has constantly whitewashed the real situation" (DN 2013–05–27). This juxtaposition of corporate resilience and external critique marks an ambivalent media stance: hopeful yet increasingly wary. As the company collapsed, DN's tone grew dramatic and emotionally charged. Headlines such as "Northland filed for bankruptcy" (DN 2014–10–08) marked the turning point. Reporting featured stories of betrayal and disappointment. One resident lamented: "Many have moved here for the mining jobs and now everything is falling apart." Despite this, broader structural issues—global commodity markets, regulatory oversight—were underexplored. DN's coverage focused on local emotional fallout rather than macroeconomic critique.

During 2013–2014, NSD's language evolves from one of continued optimism and pride to deep concern and emotional reflection. Phrases such as "Similar as Klondike" (2013–12–23),"This is a partial victory" (2013–10–29), shifted dramatically to: "When the disaster came to Pajala" (2014–12–09). The reporting moves from celebratory announcements to crisis-mode headlines marked by personal loss and community fear. NSD gradually incorporate more critique and dissent, and reflects an existential uncertainty: economic dependencies, political negotiations, and environmental impacts all converge calling for state intervention: "The federal government can step in here and manage", (2014–12–08). The influx of workers, growth in local services, and hope tied to the mine contrast with fears of abandonment. Cultural identity and local values are invoked, especially when discussing the impact of collapse and lack of public support. While regional pride and local initiatives continue to shape the discourse, the limitations of municipal and

[1] All quotes are originally in Swedish.
[2] "Northland Resources" was the name of the company initiating the mining boom in Pajala.

corporate capacity become evident. Through shifting tones and expanding perspectives, NSD reflects a broader reckoning with the socio-economic model of extractive industries in rural regions.

2015–2017: Post crisis, Blame, Investigation, and Renewal: In the aftermath of the bankruptcy DN adopted a more investigative tone. A 2015 retrospective described Northland's rise and fall as a huge economic and industrial setback: "After a rampage that was pure'Wild West', Northland crashed on December 8 in Sweden's perhaps largest bankruptcy." (DN 2015–10–08). Responsibility was attributed to political and business elites, but the newspaper's own early and somewhat sceptical framing was not addressed at all. In parallel, DN reported renewed hopes for industrial recovery. A corporate voice stated: "As it looks now, we think we can count it back [make it profitable]." (DN 2017–02–26) Environmental concerns gained traction. In 2017, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency argued: "The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency believes that it is not possible to operate the mine - that Northland did before the bankruptcy." (reported in DN 2017–12–14) This dual discourse—critique of the past, hope for a greener future—characterized the phase.

With the boom period over, the discourse is marked by restructuring and strategic reflection. The social practice revolves around questions of long-term sustainability, environmental responsibility, and the state's infrastructural role. There is ongoing tension between local hopes and national-level silence or caution regarding further investment. The language in NSD's articles 2016–2017 is gradually shifting toward a hopeful and strategically promotional narrative. By late 2017, the rhetoric becomes energized, with quotes like "Let's roll" (2017–11–22) and "A big day for Pajala" (2017–11–23) marking renewed optimism. Recurring contrasts between previous failure and future potential highlight a narrative of rebirth. The discourse repeatedly situates Kaunisvaara in the socio-cultural fabric of Norrbotten. Statements from local leaders (e.g., mine manager) affirm the commitment to stationing labour locally rather than relying on 'fly-in-fly-out'. The emotional stakes are clear in quotes like "This is real, and means a lot to Pajala and the whole district" (2017–11–23). There is a clear effort to connect industrial momentum with regional belonging and pride.

2018–2021: Environmental Critique and Indigenous Rights: By 2018 and 2019, DN's discourse had diversified significantly. Reporting increasingly addressed legal controversies, ecological infractions, and indigenous opposition. An article from DN (2019–09–13) reported: "Dams not built according to the permit - environmental crime." Such coverage reflected a shift toward regulatory accountability. Criticism extended beyond company practices to encompass broader governance questions. A 2021 article emphasized the impact on Sámi communities: "New study: Mining hits the Sámi community hard - without respect for their rights." (DN 2021–04–26). Notably, DN now included critical academic voices and recognized the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge and legal claims. Even corporate representatives acknowledged ecological stakes: "Mining is a fairly large intervention in nature." (DN 2021–04–26). This phase marked a move toward pluralism in DN's discursive framing, with indigenous, environmental, and legal perspectives gaining unprecedented visibility.

Between 2018 and 2021, NSD articles exhibit a dual textual mode—one optimistic and expansionist, the other legalistic and risk-oriented. Headlines such as "Kaunis Iron wants to invest big" (2018–12–19), "Now a destiny week awaits the mine" (2021–11–15), and "The first year of the mine – a financial success" (2020–02–15) reflect both soaring ambitions and regulatory uncertainties. The vocabulary oscillates between expressions such as "Billion-kronor investment", "Confidence", and "Mining crisis", capturing fluctuating expectations and concerns.

NSD continues to act as both chronicler and promoter of the regional mining narrative, foregrounding voices from municipal leaders, company representatives, and national authorities. This dual framing allows the newspaper to balance industrial advocacy with civic journalism, thereby strengthening both legitimacy and public resonance. Kaunisvaara is positioned not only as a local economic engine but as a node in broader processes of regional revitalization, climate transition, and national competitiveness.

At the same time, the coverage reflects recurring tensions over environmental impacts, legal disputes, and state responsiveness—issues that signal a discursive shift toward greater complexity, where experts and administrative actors increasingly shape the narrative alongside local stakeholders. The mine is portrayed as both a regional responsibility and an ecological risk. The regional dimension remains persistent and pronounced. By combining place-based storytelling with critical engagement, NSD offers a discourse that is grounded in local experience yet resonant within national debates on extractive futures.

2022–2024: Legitimacy, Sustainability, and Post-Extractive Imaginaries: In the most recent phase, DN's reporting adopted a more reflective and critical stance. Framing centred on long-term sustainability, legitimacy, and competing visions for the future. An editorial in DN (2024–09–24) urged: "Limit the extraction of natural resources to save our planet." This language signals a normative turn—away from growth as an unquestioned good toward ecological restraint and intergenerational justice. Questions of who benefits and who bears the cost of extractivism became increasingly central. Discursive tensions emerged between extractive momentum and post-industrial imaginaries, between regional autonomy and global climate imperatives. Framing devices now emphasized conflict and ambiguity: between extractivism and sustainability, growth and justice, centre and periphery. The Kaunisvaara mine was no longer framed simply as an economic opportunity or cautionary tale, but as a symbol of a contested future.

In 2022–2024 NSD's textual style becomes highly polarized—shifting between celebration and crisis management. Language often emphasizes strategic stakes; "Environmental permit", "a fateful verdict", "a mining nation" and local sentiment; "happiness", "scenes of joy", "confidence", revealing a dual discourse of regional pride and regulatory strain. NSD maintains its role as a regional narrator by highlighting Pajala's response and grassroots impact. On a societal level, NSD presents the mine as part of Sweden's industrial fabric and green transition while confronting its vulnerabilities. Environmental opposition intensifies e.g., by The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, (reported in DN 2024–11–27), raising ethical, legal, and ecological questions. Simultaneously, national economic narratives reinforce the mine's legitimacy. The discourse encapsulates regional economic dependency, national ambition, and European critical raw material strategies. NSD's reporting continues to embed the mine deeply within the socio-cultural fabric of the local community. From local celebrations in Kaunisvaara *Folkets Hus* [Peoples House] (2022–11–02) to reflections on local pride: "Pajala's hallmark today is the smile", (2022–01–13), the mine remains a symbol of resilience. Regional identity remains integral—both as a rhetorical resource and as a lived experience shaping Pajala's future. NSD acts not merely as a chronicler but as a discursive co-producer of this evolving narrative.

3.1. NSD as narrator" vs. "DN as arbiter

This comparative discourse analysis applies Norman Fairclough's three-level framework—textual (micro), discursive practice (*meso*), and social practice (macro)—to investigate differences in how *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), Sweden's leading national newspaper, and *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD), the largest regional daily newspaper in Norrbotten, represented the Kaunisvaara mining project between 2006 and 2024.

Micro-Level (Textual Analysis) DN's language throughout the mine's trajectory reflects a metropolitan, professionalized tone, with coverage initially dominated by technocratic optimism, then shifting to legalistic, environmental, and normative discourses in later years. Lexical choices move from terms like "Start Button," "Opportunities," and "Development" (2006–2012) to "Environmental Crimes," "Rights," and "Sustainability" (2018–2024). DN's tone becomes investigative and

critical over time, using formal modalities and citing expert voices. In contrast, NSD's textual discourse is regionally embedded and emotionally charged. Lexicon includes expressions like "Hope," "Happiness," "Klondyke," and "Destiny Day." NSD consistently employs celebratory, personal, and local idioms. Direct quotes from workers and residents humanize the industrial process. Even in critique (2013–2014), the tone retains emotional proximity, emphasizing community cohesion and local agency.

Meso-Level (Discursive Practice) DN relies heavily on institutional actors and expert authorities. It privileges interviews with political leaders, economic analysts, and environmental agencies. The discursive genre varies from reportage to editorials and investigative journalism, with relatively limited inclusion of lay voices until the later period. NSD consistently privileges local voices. Its coverage includes truck drivers, municipal staff, and grassroots actors. NSD functions not only as a chronicler but as a discursive facilitator of regional transformation. Its repetition of storylines about hope, return, and local investment creates discursive continuity that links the mine to the social fabric of Pajala. DN's editorial logic is shaped by distance—physical and symbolic. It often foregrounds national and global relevance, such as Sweden's climate goals or critical raw materials strategy, with only intermittent regional localization. NSD's editorial production reflects proximity—journalists live and work in the region, shaping a discursive intimacy between paper and place.

Macro-Level (Social Practice) At the macro level, DN's coverage evolves with changing societal debates. Initially aligned with narratives of rural development and economic innovation, it later mirrors national ideological shifts toward ecological justice and post-extractive futures. Its framing aligns with national economic policy, environmental regulation, and international sustainability norms. NSD's macro-discourse is anchored in regional survival. Its narrative structure foregrounds Norrbotten's peripheral status, historic outmigration, and longing for inclusion in national prosperity. The mine is framed as both a remedy for marginalization and a test of Sweden's commitment to rural justice. NSD embeds the mine in emotional memory, local identity, and cultural resilience. DN's distance allows for greater pluralism in later phases but also risks abstraction. NSD's closeness offers depth and emotional credibility but sometimes reduces space for systemic critique. Together, they reflect a center-periphery discourse gap: DN as national arbiter of legitimacy; NSD as regional custodian of belonging and social cohesion.

The following table synthesizes the discursive dynamics of DN and NSD across the key time periods, drawing on Fairclough's three-level model. It provides a comparative overview of how textual features, discursive practices, and underlying social narratives evolved over time in response to shifting economic, political, and environmental conditions (Table 2).

As the table illustrates, the discursive framing of the Kaunisvaara mine is not static but shifts across time, scale, and institutional context. These shifts reveal how national and regional media construct competing imaginaries of legitimacy, cohesion, and development—each grounded in distinct narrative logics and representational priorities.

3.2. Summary

This comparative analysis of DN and NSD reveals distinct discursive strategies shaped by scale, audience, and institutional proximity. DN's national voice transitions from early optimism to later scepticism, adopting a critical and pluralistic tone aligned with global environmental discourses and state-centred accountability. It frames the Kaunisvaara mine as a node in broader ideological debates about growth, sustainability, and extractivism. NSD, as Norrbotten's leading regional newspaper, maintains a regionally grounded discourse throughout. It constructs the mine as a symbol of economic hope, social cohesion, and rural pride. Its language is more affective, and its sources more locally embedded. Even as it incorporates critique during periods of collapse and controversy, it continues to frame the mine as a story of local agency and resilience.

Table 2
Summary of discursive features by period and level.

Period	Micro (Textual Level)	Meso (Discursive Practice)	Macro (Social Practice)
2006–2009	DN: Technocratic, formal. NSD: Hopeful, emotive, community-centered.	DN: Focus on experts, institutions. NSD: Local actors, everyday experiences.	DN: Development ideology, growth consensus. NSD: Peripheral revival, regional hope.
2010–2012	DN: Promotional, optimistic. NSD: Ceremonial, heroic, regional pride.	DN: Municipal and corporate voices dominate. NSD: Strong regional-political linkage.	DN: Modernization and integration logic. NSD: Economic remedy for marginalization.
2013–2014	DN: Critical, financial terminology. NSD: Emotional, reflective, existential tones.	DN: Economic analysts, local voices emerge. NSD: More inclusion of critical perspectives.	DN: Systemic doubt emerges. NSD: Reckoning with structural fragility.
2015–2017	DN: Investigative, ambivalent. NSD: Strategic optimism, narrative of rebirth.	DN: Mixed editorial styles, re-assessment. NSD: Focus on renewal narratives and memory.	DN: Environmental regulation enters discourse. NSD: Sustainability + identity hybrid.
2018–2021	DN: Legalistic, ecological, pluralist. NSD: Ambitious but cautious, balancing tone.	DN: Indigenous and legal inclusion. NSD: Mix of legal authority and local pride.	DN: Governance and indigenous rights central. NSD: Critical environmental realism begins.
2022–2024	DN: Normative, sustainability-focused. NSD: Polarized, strategic vs grassroots tone.	DN: Editorials push post-extractivism. NSD: Balancing environmental pressure and identity.	DN: Climate justice and legitimacy. NSD: Crisis management + symbolic resilience.

While DN presents the mine as an object of scrutiny within shifting policy and environmental regimes, NSD positions it as a subject of communal aspiration and survival. Fairclough's framework reveals how discourse is shaped by institutional position and geographic proximity, with national and regional media producing divergent yet overlapping narratives of industrial transformation in Sweden's far north.

These media narratives are not merely reflections of interviews or events but help structure the symbolic and emotional frameworks within which communities interpret change. As Fairclough (2003) and Couldry (2008) argue, media discourses actively participate in the shaping of social reality by privileging certain voices, legitimizing specific values, and structuring the interpretive repertoires available to the public. Thus, the divergent narratives constructed by DN and NSD may influence not only public opinion but also how legitimacy and belonging are negotiated within affected communities.

4. Discussion: from identity to ideology – and the question of social cohesion

The case of Kaunisvaara illustrates how media discourses help construct the symbolic landscapes through which rural communities navigate socio-economic and environmental transformation. While *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) provides a national lens, *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD) offers a regional perspective that is more tightly intertwined with local experiences, attachments, and anxieties. Together, these newspapers represent different scales of narrative authority, and their interplay reveals how questions of identity, ideology, and social cohesion are negotiated in and through media.

DN's evolving representations reflect shifting ideological terrains in Swedish society—moving from developmental optimism and industrial promise to more complex narratives of sustainability, justice, and plural

futures. In the early years, DN's framing closely aligned with boom-town literature, emphasizing growth, employment, and infrastructural modernization. These discourses reinforced a linear developmental logic that situated mining as a strategic solution to rural marginalization. However, as financial, environmental, and social risks emerged, DN began incorporating critical perspectives, albeit incrementally. This shift mirrored broader societal debates around sustainability, accountability, and rights-based governance.

By contrast, NSD's reporting often foregrounded local voices, experiences, and emotional attachments to place. It framed the mine not merely as an economic opportunity but as a symbol of regional dignity and survival. This more community-centered discourse helped maintain a sense of belonging and cohesion, even as uncertainty mounted. NSD also paid closer attention to municipal politics, labour perspectives, and historical continuities, anchoring the mine within a longer narrative of regional resilience. At times, however, NSD's optimism bordered on advocacy, sidelining more critical perspectives on environmental impact and indigenous rights—revealing that cohesion itself can be discursively produced through exclusion as well as inclusion.

Crucially, media did not merely mirror events but actively shaped public perceptions of legitimacy, agency, and responsibility. DN's early marginalization of environmental and indigenous concerns, followed by their gradual inclusion, reveals how hegemonic narratives are both persistent and permeable. In contrast, NSD's proximity to local realities provided a counterweight to national framings, yet it is reasonably to claim that NSD was itself shaped by regional political cultures and economic aspirations. Over time, both papers expanded their discursive spaces to accommodate more complex and sometimes conflicting values, indicating a renegotiation of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and authority in public discourse. These findings invite a rethinking of how rural cohesion is mediated—not just by local governance or economic policy, but by media infrastructures that shape public imaginaries, political legitimacy, and spatial belonging.

The Kaunisvaara case also illustrates the interplay between local identity and national ideological frameworks. While local actors emphasized hope and survival, national media framed these expressions within broader debates on ecological restraint, climate responsibility, and post-extractive futures. This created a layered discursive terrain where extractive imaginaries collided with alternative visions of regional transformation. The tension between these framings speaks directly to the fragility and dynamism of social cohesion in rural contexts. As in Fjellborg et al. (2022), the Kaunisvaara case reflects how anti-extraction movements and counter-publics navigate discursive space, though in this study, such tensions are more subtly embedded in editorial practices than in protest repertoires. This aligns with Dampier et al. (2014) and Zhang et al. (2024) but also suggests a fragmentation in cohesion discourses—where national outlets stress procedural legitimacy and environmental governance, while regional narratives foreground emotional bonds and survival imaginaries.

Importantly, this study reaffirms media narratives—whether celebratory, sceptical, or ambivalent—help shape how communities imagine their place in a changing world. While this study focuses on traditional print media, it acknowledges that social media may increasingly shape perceptions of rural transformation. However, in the specific context of northern Sweden, legacy regional newspapers like NSD still retain a strong local influence, particularly among older generations. Future research should explore how digital platforms may complement or challenge these narratives. Heritage discourses, whether rooted in mining, resistance, or adaptation, serve as tools for managing disruption and envisioning renewal. They can unite or divide, include or marginalize, depending on how they are mobilized.

4.1. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how national and regional media discourses have shaped the symbolic landscape surrounding the Kaunisvaara mine, transforming it from a local industrial initiative into a site of contested futures. Through a critical discourse analysis of *Dagens Nyheter* and *Norrländska Socialdemokraten*, the article reveals how narratives of development, legitimacy, and environmental responsibility are constructed differently depending on institutional position, editorial stance, and regional proximity. While national media embedded the mine within broader ideological frameworks of growth, competitiveness, and sustainability, regional media foregrounded place-based identities, economic hope, and local pride. These divergent framings illustrate how extractive geographies are not only materially implemented but also discursively produced and negotiated.

Rather than viewing media as passive reflectors of opinion, the findings underscore their potential active role in constructing meaning, managing tensions, and mediating legitimacy. Understanding these discursive dynamics is essential for grasping how industrial transformation is interpreted across societal scales—and how narratives of progress, risk, and responsibility are unevenly distributed in time and space. In light of ongoing shifts in resource policy and rural development strategies, the Kaunisvaara case offers a lens into how media help articulate competing visions of what is at stake, for whom, and on what terms.

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During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT in order to conduct the initial empirical analysis of >900 newspaper articles. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Peter Waara: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Appendix 1. Conceptual Template

The conceptual template below supports the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. It outlines key elements analysed across the textual, discursive, and social dimensions.

Textual Level (Micro-Level)

- Lexical choices: Identification of dominant keywords and phrases (e.g.,"investment," "risk," "opportunity," "threat")
- Modality and evaluation: Use of evaluative or modal terms (e.g.,"must," "should," "important," "unfortunate")
- Representation of actors: Analysis of how various stakeholders (companies, politicians, citizens, Sami representatives) are positioned and described
- Framing devices and metaphors: Use of figurative language and discursive devices (e.g.,"lifeline," "boom," "collapse")
- Distribution of agency: Use of active versus passive constructions to assign responsibility

Discursive Practice (Meso-Level)

- Text production and authorship: Identification of journalistic genres (news reports, editorials, commentaries)
- Intertextuality: Presence of references to other texts, voices, and perspectives
- Voice inclusion/exclusion: Which actors are given discursive space, and which are marginalized or omitted?
- Genre shifts: Changes in style or format over time (e.g., from reporting to analysis or opinion)

- Discursive coherence: Repetition of certain themes or narratives across different texts

Social Practice (Macro-Level)

- Ideological framing: Identification of dominant societal narratives (e.g., growth, sustainability, justice)
- Alignment with institutional agendas: Relation to national economic, environmental, or cultural policy frameworks
- Conflict and consensus: Analysis of tensions between competing value systems and discursive coalitions
- Historical and political context: Situating media discourse within broader structural and temporal developments (e.g., economic cycles, policy reforms, climate politics)

This conceptual template ensured methodological rigor and interpretive consistency in analysing how DN and NSD discursively constructed the Kaunisvaara mine across multiple phases and perspectives.

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