Inside the echo chamber

A qualitative study on anti-immigration internet media, political polarization and social trust in a fragmented digital landscape

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Abstract

“Filter bubble” became one of the most topical words of 2016 and it was even included in the Swedish Language Council’s list of new Swedish words that was presented at the end of the year. Referring to algorithmically adapted media bubbles, this phenomenon has particularly been discussed in relation to the UK Brexit referendum and the US election as scholars and journalist argue that the phenomenon, in combination with a fragmented media usage, contribute to a political polarization where each side of the political spectrum is encapsulated in “echo chambers” where opinions and beliefs are repeated like an echo rather than contested and challenged.

In a Swedish context, filter bubbles and echo chambers have mainly been discussed in relation to anti-immigration internet media (AIIM), such as Avpixlat, Fria Tider and Exponerat, as these, through their critique of established journalistic media’s (EJM) reporting, appear to constitute one side of a polarized debate around immigration. Through online interviews with 13 users of AIIM, this thesis is aimed at understanding why people consume such media and if the consumers are affected by echo chambers.

Drawing on theories on online echo chambers and radical media critique, the study’s findings suggest that even though the respondents’ appear to thrive on a siege mentality where anti-immigration groups are excluded sub-groups with AIIM as their only solution, the respondents’ consumption of AIIM (and critique of EJM) is more likely to be based on a combination of a low level of trust in society and strong political (right-wing) beliefs. Furthermore, the study shows that the respondents are likely to be affected by both fragmentation and filter bubbles, but that they are not completely isolated in an anti-immigration media bubbles as they also rely on EJM’s reporting in several ways.

Keywords:
Alternative media, anti-immigration media, social media, filter bubbles, algorithms, media critique, polarization, fragmentation, balkanization, social trust
Appendix 4 Initial interview questions (eng translation)
1. Introduction
The news year of 2016 was marked by two extraordinary events that caused sensational headlines such as “Europe stunned by UK leave vote” (Morris 2016) and “the most shocking results night in US history” (Pells 2016). Based on the news reporting, the world appeared to be in shock twice this year, both over the results from the UK Brexit referendum on June 23rd and the US election on November 8th.

And I was equally puzzled by the results as the rest of the world appeared to be, both of the Brexit referendum and the US election. Scrolling down my own Facebook feed, I could not find a single Brexit voter, whereas my news feed was filled with hundreds and hundreds of “Bremain” arguments. And the same applied to the US election, out of my several hundreds of Facebook friends, it appeared as if I didn't have a single Trump supporter on my friends list, whereas my daily news feed was filled with anti-Trump articles, posts and memes. The fact that most news media also predicted a completely different outcome from both the UK referendum and the US elections (ibid), prompts the question “how could this have happened?”

In an attempt to answer this question, several journalists have lately pointed to a phenomenon called “filter bubbles” as a reason as to why the media failed to predict the Brexit/Trump victory (Wallner 2016, Thoernéus 2016, Wong et.al. 2016). This term, which was originally coined by journalist Eli Pariser in the book *The filter bubble: what the internet is hiding from you* (2011), refers to Internet's algorithmic functions that calculate your interests and preferences and adapt your online experience accordingly. While this phenomenon also applies to search engines such as Google, it has in the context of Brexit and the US election mainly been discussed in terms of social networking sites such as Facebook. On Facebook, filter bubbles appear as the site's algorithms suggest friends, posts, news articles and groups according to your previously expressed interests and actions. Posts from friends that you frequently interact with, links that you have previously clicked and articles similar to what you have previously “liked” thus ends up at the top of your news feed, creating a “bubble” tailored to suit your own personal interests, beliefs and opinions (ibid, Eslami et.al. 2015, Silverman 2015). This term “filter bubble” (Swedish: filterbubbla) even appeared on the Swedish Language Council’s list of new words in the Swedish language in 2016 (Carp 2016).

Not only are fake news stories more difficult to debunk once they have spread within a filter bubble, but these bubbles also contribute to a more polarized debate as it means, to take the US election as an example, that Trump supporters would have been more likely to be exposed to Clinton-critical posts whereas Clinton supporters would have been more likely to be reached by anti-Trump posts on
their Facebook feeds. And the same polarization is hence also likely to have been caused by filter bubbles between the Brexit/Bremain sides in the run up for the UK referendum (Wallner 2016, Thoernéus 2016, Wong et.al. 2016).

Furthermore, the huge amount of information available on the internet also forces media users to choose their news consumption to a higher degree than before the digital era. This individualization of news consumption, which is usually referred to as **fragmentation or balkanization** in academia, in combination with Internet's filter bubbles create **echo chambers**, in which the user's already existing opinions and beliefs get repeated and confirmed like and echo, rather than contested or exposed to any opposition (Pariser 2011, Eslami et.al. 2015, Silverman 2015).

Although there haven't been any news events that could match the “Brexit shock” or the “Trumpquake” in Sweden this year, the concept of echo chambers is just as relevant here, particularly in relation to the rise of far right-wing and anti-immigration internet media, such as Avpixlat, Exponerat and Fria Tider, as these appear to constitute one side of a polarized debate around immigration in Sweden (Strömbäck 2015, Andersson Schwarz et.al. 2015).

Although several scholars and researchers argue that anti-immigration and right-wing extremist echo chambers are particularly important to study as they may breed extremism, little research have actually been conducted on the users of anti-immigration media, such as those mentioned above (Silverman 2015, Askanius & Mylonas 2015, Larsson 2015). According to Strömbäck (Medierna 2015), this may be due to the fact that these groups are usually difficult to reach through regular surveys as they tend to be just as skeptical towards research as they are of established journalistic media. This thesis seeks to fill this research gap through exploring 13 anti-immigration internet media users’ media worlds to find out if they are in fact affected by the echo chamber phenomenon that the combination of filter bubbles and fragmentation create.

1.1 **Aim and research questions**

Through in-depth interviews with 13 consumers of anti-immigration internet media, this thesis aims to analyze why the respondents use AII and if they affected by echo chambers.

This will be done through answering two sets of research questions. Drawing on theories and research on fragmentation, filter bubbles and social trust, the first set of questions seek to explore what the respondents' media worlds look like in the context of both fragmentation and filter bubbles.
1. How do they consume AIIM and EJM respectively? Should the respondents be considered as news seekers or news avoiders?
2. What role do social media play in their overall media consumption? How aware are they of algorithms and filter bubbles?
3. What is the relationship between their level of trust in society and their consumption of AIIM?
4. How do their political views correlate with their media consumption?

Drawing on theories and studies on alternative media and radical media critique, the purpose of the second set of research questions is to analyze the respondents' critique of media and society and the reasoning behind their AIIM usage and in that, identifying any paradoxes in their accounts that may indicate if they are influenced by the echo chamber phenomenon.

5. What is their critique of media and society based on?
6. What is their perception of AIIM's role in society?

The hope is that the combination of these research questions will contribute to a view on what the respondents' media worlds look like and if these are in fact influenced by the echo chamber phenomenon.
2. Background/literature review

On September 28th, a huge argument between SVT presenter Janne Josefsson and the channel's director Jan Helin broke out in live television. The argument concerned SVT's Aktuellt's decision to invite the anti-immigration website Nya Tider to take part in a debate in one of its news casts. Helin argued that it was wrong to invite them to a debate on public service, referring to them as “undemocratic” whereas Josefsson argued that not allowing extremists to appear in public service would be a threat to freedom of speech (Grönlund 2016). This “debate about the debate” was later widely criticized for being “unprofessional” and Sweden Radio's Medierna referred to it as “an embarrassing staff meeting” (Medierna 2016).

While this incident illustrates established journalistic media (EJM)'s struggle with how to treat anti-immigration internet media (AIIM) due to their undemocratic values, the AIIM's often take a clear standpoint against EJM, constantly accusing them of hiding the truth about immigration (Fria Tider 2013, Avpixlat 2015, Exponerat 2014).

This conflict between established journalistic media and anti-immigration internet media, is referred to as a “media war” by Dag Thorén (2015) in his master thesis Medikriget: En diskursesthetisk studie om demokrati, journalistik och social sammanhållning i en fragmenterad digital offentlighet, in which he analyzes the discourse around immigration in Sweden, based on a anti-immigration thread on the Swedish online debate forum Flashback. Using discourse analysis, he identifies two opposing groups in the anti-immigration propagators' accounts; the “truth speakers” (AIIM users) and the “truth hiders” (EJM) and concludes that the anti-immigration “truth speakers” will not begin to trust the “truth hiding” EJM, unless EJM change to a more immigration critical discourse in their news reporting.

Other than the previously mentioned Nya Tider, the list of anti-immigration internet media in Sweden includes websites such as Avpixlat, Pettersson gör skillnad!, Exponerat, Fria Tider, Dispatch International and Samtiden, just to name a few. While studies have shown a decrease in the consumption of traditional media in the past few years (Strömbäck 2015, Ksiazek et.al. 2010), Jesper Strömbäck (2015) suggests that people who avoid ”news” in the conventional sense may in fact be very active consumers of other media channels, such as these anti-immigration websites and blogs. Research also suggest that although usage of anti-immigration websites as a main news source is relatively rare, users of these sites are usually rather active, not only in their media consumption but also in referencing these sites in debates and discussions on social media.
The websites in question are usually referred to as “hate-sites” or “racist media” by Swedish established journalistic media (Hammarlund & Andersson Schwarz 2016) and simply as “alternative media” by their users but neither of these options are suitable for this report as they lack in neutrality. Furthermore, the topic of whether they should actually be classified as “alternative” or not has also been widely debated by journalists and media scholars alike in recent years. Kristoffer Holt (2016) uses the term “immigration-critical alternative media” to describe these sites in a study where he analyzes some of the largest websites of this kind with an emphasis on their relationship with established journalistic media. Although referring to them as “alternative”, he strongly emphasizes their dependence on established journalistic media as he notes that 60% of the analyzed anti-immigration website articles refer to material previously published in the established media and thus argues that the word “alternative” in the context of “immigration critical alternative media” should be understood as politically “oppositional”, as they widely criticize and discuss traditional media content, rather than “alternative” in the sense of an independent substitute for established journalistic media.

It is also debatable whether these websites meet the criteria listed by Sandoval & Fuchs (2010) for the label “alternative media”, as these scholars argue that “alternative media” should not only contain critical content but also “(i)n one or the other respect take the standpoint of oppressed groups or exploited classes and make the judgement that structures of oppression and exploitation benefit certain classes at the expense of others and hence should be radically transformed by social struggles” (ibid 2010, p.146). Despite their critical content, one could certainly argue that the websites studied in this thesis do not particularly aim to support oppressed groups or exploited classes, unless “immigration critics” are viewed as oppressed or exploited. Nevertheless, many of the anti-immigration websites in questions seem to thrive on a siege mentality where the case that they are trying to make is that “ethnic swedes”, and particularly Sweden Democrats, would indeed constitute an oppressed social group.

Taking the discussion around alternative media further, Linus Andersson (2012) argues that the term “alternative” could be understood in both social and formalist terms, as it can both be discussed as media of social movements against inequality (as per Sandoval Fuch's suggestions above), but also as an “alternative to neoliberal enclosures of cognitive resources, as might be found in the realm of art” (Andersson 2012, p. 759), thus arguing that art can be even more powerful than journalism in critiquing neoliberalism and capitalism. Due to their lack of critique of neoliberalism/capitalism as
well as any artistic expressions, I would argue that AIIM neither apply to the social nor the formalist terms that Andersson suggest as definitions of alternative media.

Weighing in all of these factors, the term anti-immigration internet media (AIIM) will be used throughout this report in reference to this particular type of websites. This term has been chosen in an attempt to clearly describe their anti-immigration focus, while also avoiding the term “alternative” due to the reasons outlined above.

In reference to the type of media that AIIM pose themselves as being in opposition to, i.e. established TV, radio and press, the term “established journalistic media” (EJM) will mainly be used, however references to “traditional media” may also occur. Other terms that will appear in the analysis are “old media”, “mainstream media” and “PK-media” (politically correct media), all of which are based on the respondents’ own statements. In the interview questions, the term “mainstream media” was chosen as it appeared to be the most neutral option, in light of the respondents’ preferences.

Whether through the perspective of EJM or AIIM, it is evident that immigration has been a major topic on the public agenda in the last few years (Andersson Schwarz & Hammarlund 2016), and this should also be understood in the context of another contemporary internet phenomenon, namely social networking sites, such as Facebook. Although the internet enables for a more participatory culture as almost anyone can engage in media production through participation on social networking sites, the implications of such media are frequently up for debate, particularly in regards to “cyberhate”, which refers to harassment, threats and bullying in an online context (Forsberg Fierro 2016, Kihlström 2016). Scholars point to anonymity as one of the key factors as to why cyberhate exists, as studies show that anonymity releases inhibitions, which leads individuals to using more hateful language when sat in front of a computer screen than they would in an offline context (Suler 2004, Haines et.al. 2012). Considering the fact that immigration is considered the most important topic by many Swedes, this suggests that the debate climate around immigration is harsher online than in offline debate forums. Consequently, there are endless examples of racist cyberhate that have been revealed in EJM in the past few years, most recently when Swedish department store Åhléns used an image of a coloured young boy wearing a white dress and crown in an advert for the upcoming Swedish pre-christmas “Lucia” celebrations. The image was met by a storm of racist cyberhate on Åhléns' Facebook page, and eventually the boy's parents requested Åhléns to remove the image. It was later revealed that the racism storm was organized by a closed right wing extremist Facebook group (Törner 2016, Thurfjell 2016).
Furthermore, the internet contributes to a fragmented media consumption. The huge amount of information available on the internet forces the user to choose his/her media consumption, which is usually adapted to suit the user's own personal interests and, hence, risks leading to this fragmentation, or balkanization, of the media landscape (Sunstein 1999) (see chapter 3.1 for a detailed explanation of these terms).

This phenomenon is particularly evident on social media such as Facebook as this social networking platform not only allows for a more personalized news consumption through letting the user choose which friends, news sources and groups to “follow” or “hide” depending on his/her interests, but also enforces a hidden filtering, beyond the user's control, as user interests are tracked and online behavior data-mined so that individual news feeds can be algorithmically adapted, creating what is commonly referred to as ”filter bubbles” (Pariser 2011). As briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter of this report, this means that you are more likely to receive recommended friends, pages, groups, adverts and news updates that correlate with your previously expressed interests.

Additionally, studies show that the majority of Facebook users are in fact unaware of these algorithms that can skew their exposure to the surrounding world (Silverman 2015, Eslami et.al. 2015, Quattrociocchi et.al. 2015).

In these “echo chambers” that are created by the combination of fragmentation and filter bubbles, political beliefs and opinions risk being confirmed and repeated like echoes rather than contested by opponents or exposed to scrutiny (Silverman 2015, Quattrociocchiet.al. 2015, Strömbäck 2015).

Inside the online echo chamber, attempts at debunking any fake or biased news stories usually fail. This is due to the fact that despite being experienced by the people who populate these insular interest communities, the usage of these strongly biased media do not favour thorough, truly critical self-scrutiny as a means of searching for an “objective truth”. There are examples of how attempts at debunking fake news stories are ignored or even brushed away with arguments such as “it doesn’t matter if it’s fake or true” or ”there is no need to fact-check this, as the truth is self-evident”, which further demonstrates the implications of individualized media consumption within echo chambers (Silverman 2015, Quattrociocchiet.al. 2015, Miller et.al. 2016).

Several studies point in the direction that the connection between far right-wing values and echo chambers is particularly strong and in need of further research. In the article Extreme-right responses to the European economic crisis in Denmark and Sweden: The discursive construction of
scapegoats and lodestars, Tina Askanius and Yiannis Mylonas (2015) attempt to find out how the European economic crisis is discursively constructed in far-right online media in Denmark and Sweden through analysing articles from nationalist online news and propaganda sites. They conclude that these online media form a type of “anti-public spheres” where a discourse of Greece as both a “scapegoat” and a “lodestar” is constructed, as Greece is seen as an epicentre for the pan-European economic crisis and at the same time an inspiration due to the rise of nationalist party Golden Dawn. As a conclusion, the authors argue that “it is crucial to uncover and draw attention to what is going on in these obscure corners of the Internet”, referring to the nationalist values propagated on these online media as “one smouldering fire that we above all need to extinguish”.

The connection between far right wing values and online echo chambers is further discussed in the article Everyday elites, citizens, or extremists? Assessing the use and users of non-election political hashtag in which Anders Olof Larsson (2015) analyses the political discussions on Twitter under the hashtags #debatten (related to a weekly debate show) and #dax18 (related to a daily evening newscast) in Norway and #svpol (a public generated political debate forum) in Sweden. From his analysis of the political discussions under each of the three hashtags, Larsson concludes that supporters of the far-right are vastly over-represented in the discussions emanating from the Swedish #svpol hashtag in comparison to both of the Norwegian examples where the debate includes a more equal distribution of representatives from the full political spectrum. He also emphasizes the importance of including established politicians as well as citizens in the public political debate on social media as he notes that the debate under the Swedish hashtag is severely lacking political experts, which raises the question: “Where are the established politicians to enter into debate with the far-right supporters found in #svpol?”

An emphasis on far-right political standpoints along with a lack of established politicians that are willing to join the debate in #svpol is, according to Larsson, problematic as he argues that “if such extreme views – emanating from any side of the political spectrum are not challenged, political discussions on Twitter or elsewhere can hardly fulfill the role prescribed to them by pundits and scholars alike.” His findings were later supplemented by a study by Andersson Schwarz et al. (2015) where different types of quantitative content analysis were conducted on a large sample of #svpol tweets, showing that the pro-SD cluster displayed much higher retweet activity that the two established political clusters, but that the outreach of the Twitter-users making part of this cluster was limited.

Furthermore, a recent Swedish research project shows a connection between anti-immigration
politics and a low level of trust in society, which means a higher risk of not trusting established journalistic media and instead turning to alternatives. (Montgomery et. al. 2016). This finding can be further related to a recent American study by Miller et.al. (2016) that shows that people with a high level of knowledge in politics combined with a low level of trust in social institutions are most susceptible to ideologically congruent conspiracy theories. The authors’ of this study argue that conspiracy theories are particularly likely to spread within “attitude-consistent silos”, referring to what has earlier been referred to as “echo chambers” in studies such as Silverman’s (2015) and Quattrociocchi et.al.’s (2015), thus supporting the idea that rumors and fake news stories are difficult to debunk once they have spread within an echo chamber. Moreover, the study further finds that conservatives are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than liberals (Miller et.al. 2016).

All of this point in the direction that anti-immigration and far right-wing echo chambers are particularly important to study. Yet few studies have, as previously mentioned, been conducted on users of AIIM, to find out if they are in fact affected by echo chambers.
3. Theoretical framework

The theories listed in this chapter are divided into two different sections that will be applied to the empirical findings in different ways. Firstly, there is contextual theory that revolves around the concepts of online fragmentation and echo chambers that are also briefly presented in the background chapter. Although these theories are an important part of the study as they demonstrate the implications of the customized media consumption that anti-immigration internet media allows for, they are defined as contextual as most of them will be used to contextualize the empirical findings and discuss the implications of the conclusions drawn from the analytical work. This is mainly due to the fact that any firm conclusions around the existence of online echo chambers among respondents deemed difficult to prove within the limited scope of this study and would probably have required quantitative methods as well as more in-depth knowledge in psychology. That being said, some of the empirical findings around the respondents' media habits are based on these theories on online fragmentation and discussed in regards to whether the respondents are in online echo chambers or not, and what these may look like.

Furthermore, the theories of radical media critique will be used as a tool to illustrate how the respondents express their critique of media. All of the listed varieties of radical media critique are normally directed from the left, which means that they usually offer left-wing solutions to media issues. An application of these theories to the respondents' answers will hence also reveal any paradoxes in their accounts, considering the fact that their media critique are directed from the very other side of the political spectrum. Hence, these theories will be used to answer the research questions around the respondents' media critique and perception of AIIM and what they appear to base their arguments on.

3.1 Contextual theory – the fragmentation thesis

All of these theories together contribute to what Warner (2011) refers to as “the fragmentation thesis”, which together with the earlier mentioned filter bubbles create the “echo chamber” effect that I am referring to throughout this report. And although Warner (2011, p.6) refers to the fragmentation thesis as “the idea that the internet will increase extremism by splitting Americans into numerous groups of likeminded individuals” and thus applies this to an American context, I would argue that it is just as relevant when it comes to Swedish AIIM consumers as it revolves around the idea that fragmentation can create echo chambers wherein political extremism may grow. The theories outlined in this chapter are all related to the implications of a fragmented media
The fragmentation thesis starts with confirmation bias, the act of unintentionally turning to information that confirms one's already existing beliefs and opinions, a concept which is further developed in the theory of motivated reasoning, and later discussed in terms of the Internet, touching on natural collectivity, group polarization and public sphericules, all of which are phenomena that, together with filter bubbles, make up the echo chamber effect. While testing these theories would have required a different set of methodology that is beyond the scope of this study due to their psychological nature, they have still been valuable in terms of understanding the echo chamber phenomenon and hence contextualizing the study's findings.

The term confirmation bias was originally coined by psychologist Peter Watson in 1960. Watson's hypothesis is that people tend to subconsciously favour information that confirms their already existing beliefs over information that might challenge them. To demonstrate this, Watson did an experiment where the participants who were assigned a very simple numeric problem showed a tendency to only test the possible solutions that demonstrated their own initial hypotheses (Watson 1960). The term confirmation bias has been reignited in media studies in recent years as many scholars argue that digital networks can strengthen this phenomenon through the creation of echo chambers (Silverman 2015, Quattrociocchiet.al. 2015, Strömbäck 2015).

Taking the concept of confirmation bias further, motivated reasoning refers to the idea that people are motivated to reasoning processes that are aimed at maintaining their already existing beliefs and opinions when these opinions are challenged by opposing information. Although strongly related to confirmation bias, motivated reasoning thus differ from confirmation bias inasmuch as it is focused on the motivated reasoning processes that kicks in once one's attitudes are challenged, rather than the act of subconsciously favoring attitude-confirming information (Miller et.al. 2016). This thesis will focus on a specific theory of conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning, developed by Miller et.al. (2016).

Their theory argues that a person fulfilling the three criteria below would be more likely than others to endorse conspiracy theories:

1. Particular ideological worldview related to the conspiracy theory
2. Have the motivation to maintain that worldview
3. Lacks trust in social institutions

Their theory is relevant to my study as conspiracy theories are more likely to spread within echo chambers and thus the type of person who is most likely to endorse conspiracy theories should arguably also be more likely than others to be affected by echo chambers (ibid). The question of whether the respondents meet these three criteria will hence be explored in the analytical section of this report, as a means to understand how likely the respondents are to be affected by echo chambers.

Furthermore, one of the many scholars that have studied confirmation bias in an online context, Nick Couldry (2015), speaks of a myth of natural collectivity as he argues that Facebook and other social networks offer a platform where we can choose a network of individuals to connect and interact with. According to Couldry, this myth of a collective, chosen “us” on social media disguises the power structures that are also involved in social networking sites as well as these platforms' economic interests. The myth of collectivity can further be related to the concept of group polarization, explained by Cass R. Sunstein (1999, p.4f) as when “members of a deliberating group move toward a more extreme point in whatever direction is indicated by the members' predeliberation tendency”.

Sunstein further argues that the Internet is likely to strengthen group polarization as it enables for both anonymity and recruitment of group memberships, claiming that it's “therefore plausible to speculate that the Internet may be serving, for many, as a breeding group for extremism” (Sunstein 1999, p.23). To further demonstrate how the Internet can contribute to group polarization, Sunstein points to a study in which groups of three people were assigned a task of collectively deciding which one of three candidates for a marketing manager position would be most suitable for the job. All group members were given different pieces of information about each candidate, some assigned to complete the task face-to-face and some operating online. The results showed that group polarization was particularly prominent within the groups operating online as they showed an increased tendency to share positive information about the winning candidate and negative information about the losers, consequently also suppressing negative information about the winner and positive information about the losers. Although this particular study did not revolve around politics, Sunstein still argues that its findings are highly relevant as they point toward a tendency of heightened one-sidedness, and thus also extremeness, when communication occurs online. As a response to this problem, Sunstein suggests that “public spheres” where people with competing perspectives meet and interact could contribute to a prevention of balkanization and fragmentation
(ibid 1999, p.30).

The “public spheres” that Sunstein suggests as a solution to group polarization above are usually discussed in reference to Jürgen Habermas’ book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), in which he, through an array of historical examples, relates public spheres to the rise of democracy. Since Habermas’ work, the term public sphere has frequently been discussed in relation to mass media's role in politics (McQuail 1983/2005, p.181f).

On the topic of public spheres in the information age, Gitlin (1998, p.170) argues that “(t)he unitary public sphere is weak, riddled with anxiety and self-doubt, but distinct communities of information and participation are multiplying, robust and brimming with self-confidence”, referring to what he defines as “self-radicalizing public sphericules”, to which we can further relate anti-immigration internet media.

Taking Gitlin’s concept of public sphericules further, Bart Cammaerts (2008) argues that alternative media contribute to a fragmentation of the public sphere that gives rise not only to *counter-public sphericules* that challenge the dominant public sphere but also to a darker type of sphericules which he refers to as *anti-public* due to the undemocratic values expressed within them. Giving neo-Nazi and fundamentalist media as examples of anti-public sphericules, Cammaerts argues that these need to be explored further as they tend to be forgotten in analyses of counter-hegemonic communication forms (ibid 2008, p.8). See figure 2 for an illustration of Cammaerts' model in which the relationship between public, counter-public and anti-public spheres is further explained.

![Diagram of public spheres](image)

**Figure 2, Fragmentation of the public sphere** (Cammaerts 2008, p.5)
These anti-public sphericules are in fact precisely what Askanius and Mylonas (2015) are referring to as “(o)ne smouldering fire that we above all need to extinguish” in their analysis of extreme-right online media in Sweden and Denmark.

Although the fragmentation thesis is mainly used to give a context to this study's findings, Cammeart's model of anti-public and counter-hegemonic sphericules above will further be used to discuss the possible existence of an anti-immigration echo chamber, and what this may look like, in the analytical chapter of this report.

3.2 Radical media critique
Radical media critique (RMC) refers to a type of critique that is based on the view that the media system constitutes a major problem in society and, consequently, is required to be completely transformed, either through revolution or a more gradual process. According to RMC, revolutionising or reforming the media is, hence, in most cases a part of an overall objective to change the whole society at a structural level. RMC is usually associated with leftist arguments, for example that mainstream media contribute to maintaining unequal societal structures (Jakobsson 2014, p.53f). However its main concepts will in this report be applied to a form of media critique expressed from the opposing direction and will hence also help to identify any paradoxes in the respondents’ media critique.

Radical media critique can be divided into three sub-categories; critiques of distribution, critiques of recognition and critiques of openness (see figure 1 for a summary of the main characteristics for each of the three types), all of which will be further discussed in relation to the media critique expressed by the respondents in this study.

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<th>Critique’s normative standpoint?</th>
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3.2.1 Agenda setting and critiques of distribution

Critiques of distribution are mainly directed toward the ideological content in media, as most famously demonstrated through The Propaganda Model by Edvard S.Hermans and Noam Chomsky (1988/2002) in which the authors point to different filtering mechanisms that strongly influence the contents produced by media institutions in the US. Although the propaganda model aims to explain how American media institutions in particular are constructed to benefit the political (anti-communist) and financial elites, this thesis will explore how some of its arguments are used by media critics from the opposite side of the political spectrum and in a country where the media system differs from that in the US in many aspects. Apart from its critique of media's capitalist interests, some of the main points of the propaganda model is the critique of how media content is adapted to suit current political ideologies (in the American case, anti-communist) and how the media depend on governmental institutions.

Herman and Chomsky further point to mainstream media’s agenda-setting as one of their strategic tools to gain power and control over society. The theory of agenda-setting that they refer to originally derives from Max McCombs and Donald Shaw’s study on the 1968 American election, which showed a strong correlation between what citizens’ expressed as the most important election issues and what the local media reported on. From these findings, McCombs and Shaw were able to draw the conclusion that media have the power to affect the salience of topics on the public agenda (hence the term agenda-setting media) (McCombs & Shaw 1972, Herman & Chomsky 1988/2002, Jakobsson 2014, p.57ff).

Although traditionally considered as leftist critique, both the propaganda model and the theory of agenda-setting will be further explored in relation to the critique of mainstream media directed from this study's respondents in the analytic chapter of the report and, furthermore, the agenda-setting theory will also function as an analytical tool to understand mainstream media’s influence on their critics’ points of discussion in the interview situation.

3.2.2 Identity politics and critiques of recognition

Critiques of recognition rose in the late 1960's, stemming from the argument that distribution critique neglects other disadvantaged societal groups through its strong focus on the conditions of the working class. As opposed to distribution critique, recognition critique is directed toward the
media representation of marginalized groups (and constant lack thereof) with a focus on gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation as it criticizes how media tend to depict minorities as Others and only in relation to the dominant culture. Although recognition critique is also usually directed from the left, and most frequently from a feminist perspective, it can, according to Jakobsson (2014, p.62), be found within different groups from the whole political spectrum apart from the most conservative. The concept of recognition critique will in this study be used as a means to explain how claims of misrepresentations and exclusions of immigration critics and Sweden democrats in established media are formulated by AIIM consumers in a similar manner as to that of women, homosexuals and cultural minorities as expressed by the feminist left (ibid, 2014, p.60ff).

The term “identity politics” can also be equated with this type of media critique as it seeks its basis in struggles for affirmation of particular identities or sub-groups and, therefore, also has an interest in media representations since these act to ordain certain narratives or images of these group identities (Fraser 2000). While this concept of identity politics is usually equated with left wing politics and even mocked by AIIM such as Avpixlat (2016), the concept will also be used to illustrate some the respondents' own perception of AIIM users as an oppressed sub-group.

3.2.3 Critiques of openness

Developed alongside the growth of digital communication technologies in the past few decades, critiques of openness are the most historically recent examples of radical media critique. As opposed to other forms of RMC, openness critique emphasises accessibility of information over media representation and ideology, as its aim is to defend the internet user’s right to openness and freedom online. That being said, this form of critique has important ties to civic empowerment, sometimes using libertarian arguments, sometimes more universal human rights arguments (Murdoch, 2011). With propagators ranging from pirate parties to hacker groups such as Anonymous and Wikileaks, critiques of openness tend to be politically agnostic, as they focus on technology, rather than any particular political ideology. In this thesis, however, this form of RMC will be used as a tool to analyze how the respondents' discussions around democracy and freedom of speech are formulated in relation to AIIM (Jakobsson 2014, p.64ff).
3.3 Analytical model

The below analytical model summarizes how the two different sets of theories will be used in the analytical part and the theoretical discussion.

Figure 3. Analytical model
a. **Theories of radical media critique**

The theories of radical media critique will be used to draw parallels between the respondents’ critique of society and that of EJM. Together with earlier mentioned research on alternative media, these theories will help to answer the research questions of what the respondents base their critique of EJM and society on and what they view as AIIM’s role in society. Furthermore; these theories will also be used to identify any paradoxes in their critique that may insinuate that they are affected by echo chamber.

b. **Contextual theory (fragmentation thesis)**

The contextual theories based on the fragmentation thesis will be used to put the empirical findings into the context of online echo chambers. In relation to the research questions around media habits, social trust and political views, these theories will hence help to illustrate why the respondents’ media habits, media and social critique as well as their awareness of algorithmic functions are important.
4. Materials and methods

While a study of anti-immigration discourses around media and society could have been conducted on any anti-immigration online platform, this study required further information in order to also analyze the implications of fragmentation and filter bubbles among this particular group. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, qualitative interviews thus appeared to be the most suitable method to fulfill the study’s aim. This chapter outlines the reasons behind the study’s methodological decisions, from sampling, recruitment and data collection to the final interpretation of the collected data.

4.1 Sampling and recruitment

In order to reach AIIM consumers in particular, I used what Silverman (2001, p.250) refers to as purposive sampling. This means that the platforms for recruitment were purposively chosen in order to reach this particular group. As scholars such as Strömbäck (2015) argues that anti-immigration groups can be particularly skeptical toward research, I began the whole study with the recruitment process to ensure that I would have enough respondents to achieve “thick” empirical coverage. This is, according to Larsson (2010, p.77) vital for the validity of any study. Bearing the fact that the recruitment could be challenging in mind, I started by creating a Facebook profile that would serve as a base for the recruitment. Initially searching for Facebook groups and pages with anti-immigration names (such as “Sweden Democrats”, “Stop the islamification” etc.), the algorithms quickly suggested other similar pages for me to join and I was soon a member of 74 Facebook groups and pages of various sizes that discussed immigration and media. While the main reason for joining these groups was to recruit prospective respondents, this also worked as a way of familiarizing myself with the discourse around media in immigration critical groups, which proved to be useful when later composing the questionnaire for the interviews (appendix 3 & 4) (Larsson 2010,p.72f).

In each of these groups, I continued the recruitment process by posting an introduction to my project (appendix 1), along with a link to a simple webpage that contained a short description of me and my study (appendix 2).
A few weeks into the recruitment process on Facebook, I had e-mail contact with eleven men and two women, between the ages of 18-74. While the shortest interview consisted of only two short e-mails and the longest nearly 30, the average interview consisted of approximately 10-15 e-mails of various length.

The fact that only two women (compared to eleven men) participated in the study is of course noteworthy here. While the respondents were never directly asked for their own political standpoints, the fact that they all consume AIIM implies that they may sympathize with anti-immigration politics. This insinuates that this gender bias is in line with other studies that show that men are more likely than women to sympathize with the anti-immigration right wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (Sannerstedt 2014).

Furthermore, the phenomenon participation bias also needs to be considered in the interpretation of this study's results. The term refers to the phenomenon that occurs when a study's participants are not representative of a larger group due to the fact that they possess certain traits that led them to participate in the study in the first place (Keeble et.al. 2013). In terms of this study, this means that the fact that the 13 respondents chose to participate in a study on media and immigration might, for example, indicate that they are particularly interested and involved in this topic, which may not be the case for all AIIM consumers.

### 4.2 Interview format

While initially offering the respondents the choice of conducting the interview either online or in an offline setting (see appendix 1 and 2), e-mail interviews appeared to be the most suitable option in every case, due to geographical distance. As with any other interview method, there are obvious disadvantages with conducting interviews online, with one of the main arguments against this method being the lack of face-to-face contact between researcher and interviewee. According to Larsson (2010, p.65ff), this close contact along with visual representations may in fact be vital when studying a phenomenon that includes feelings and values, as these may not come across otherwise.

Also Kivits (2010, p.235) emphasizes the challenges with the e-mail format as a research method as she argues that it "demands both from the interviewer and the interviewee a strong commitment toward the subject under study and the interviewing process, lasting long after the first e-mail exchange"
While these are valid points to bear in mind when conducting e-mail interviews, I found that the very nature of my particular study helped to solve these issues. As the studied phenomenon in fact revolved around the respondents’ online behavior, I found that the study could actually benefit from also being conducted online. Since the respondents were also recruited online, they were also comfortable and familiar with virtual communication, which is yet another factor to weigh in when considering e-mail as an interview method (Hine 2006, p.26).

Regarding the reliance on commitment from the respondents, I never experienced this as an obstacle during the interview process. On the contrary, most of the respondents were in fact very committed to the interviews as well as the topic and, with only a few exceptions, responses were both frequent and detailed.

Furthermore, the relative anonymity of both the researcher and the respondents that the e-mail format allows for also proved to be beneficial for my study. As several of the respondents argue that they sometimes avoid discussing immigration out of fear of exclusion (see chapter 5.3), the anonymous setting appeared to be crucial for the respondents’ openness and honesty around this topic. On the topic of anonymity, also Hine (2006, p.26) argues that “(i)ndeed there is considerable evidence that within a research setting, people also disclose more about themselves online compared to in offline equivalents, and that much of that disclosure is more candid”. That being said, it is also important to note here that with “anonymity”, I am only referring to the fact that researcher and respondents never met face-to-face and that we only provided each other with a brief introduction of ourselves in the initial few e-mails. I used my own full name and university e-mail address and my own photo on the Facebook profile that I created for the purpose.

Apart from overcoming geographical distances, the e-mail format also saved me the additional work of transcribing the interview material, allowing more time to be spent on the density or “thickness” of the empirical material (Hine 2010, Larsson 2006, p.77).

Moreover, the e-mail format facilitated an application of a qualitative method that McCracken (1988) refers to as the long interview. The longevity of the e-mail exchanges (some lasted for several months!) allowed for the occurrence of follow-up questions which, according to McCracken, is a vital component in a successful, qualitative, long interview. Furthermore, conducting the interviews online enabled for the respondents to easily send links to online material
such as articles, podcasts and blog posts to discuss and comment upon. This further contributed to a “thicker” empirical material as several respondents developed the habit of sending links to daily news events along with their thoughts and reflections around them.

To allow for this type of spontaneous correspondence and follow-up questions, the e-mails were constructed as semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Silverman 2006, p.110). This means that even though a questionnaire covering the main research topics was used (see appendix 3-4), it was left open-ended and allowed plenty of space for follow-up questions. McCracken (1988, p.25) argues that it “is important to emphasize that the use of a questionnaire does not pre-empt the ‘open-ended’ nature of the qualitative interview. Within each of the questions, the opportunity for exploratory, uninstructed responses remains.”

4.3 Ethical issues and considerations
Due to the sensitive topic of the study, several ethical issues and dilemmas arose during the research process. Firstly, my main concern when outlining the research plan was around the recruitment of respondents. Scholars such as Strömbäck (2015) argue that people who are against immigration are usually just as skeptical toward research as they are of EJM and , furthermore, Södertörn University has been particularly criticized by AIIM, for being “racist against white people” (Petterssons gör skillnad! 2016) and “cultural marxist” (Fria Tider 2012), among many other examples. One of the biggest AIIM in Sweden, Avpixlat, has even made a video in which it mocks Södertörn for its alleged focus on identity politics (Avpixlat 2016).

And finding respondents for the study deemed, as expected, challenging and I was initially met with skepticism in most cases; one right-wing extremist group even refused to let me join their Facebook group as I wouldn't send them pictures of myself and I also received a lot of questions about my own “political colour” and discussions about whether I was “legit” or not after posting the initial Facebook recruitment posts. While wanting to be honest about my position as a Södertörn student, I knew that this might repel prospective respondents. In an attempt to solve this, I only posted a brief introduction on Facebook without mentioning my university (see Appendix 1) with a link to a more detailed description on a wordpress page in which I mentioned SH as my university and also include my university e-mail address (Appendix 2).

I found 13 respondents in the end, but the fact that I posted in 74 Facebook groups (some reaching up to nearly 50,000 members) shows that it was only a very small percentage of the people who had
viewed the post that was actually willing to participate in the study. This is in line with Strömbäck’s (2015) statement that anti-immigration groups have a tendency to be skeptical towards research.

Another question that came up during the research process was that of my own level of anonymity toward the respondents. Since my own Facebook profile contains various anti-racist and left wing posts, likes and groups, I expected my chances of recruiting respondents through my own Facebook page to be near non-existent. At the same time, it seemed unethical to conduct the study under a false identity. Due to this reason I decided to create a new Facebook page, in my own name and using my own (although purposely selected) photos. This method also proved valuable in terms of understanding the echo chamber phenomenon as it gave me an deeper insight into Facebook’s algorithmic functions. Once I started joining anti-immigration groups and pages, Facebook quickly suggested other similar groups and pages, creating a completely new world for me that only revolved around immigration politics. Although several of these anti-immigration and anti-establishment groups and pages were actually quite extensive, most of them reaching several thousand members, this was a side of Facebook that I had personally never encountered before. I find that this illustrates both the fragmentation thesis and the involvement of algorithms on Facebook that combined contributes to the echo chamber effect.

Once I had recruited all the respondents and we had started our e-mail correspondence, I did not experience any further ethical dilemmas or issues as the whole reason why I had decided to conduct this study was to understand the respondents and most of them were equally eager to share their own stories. Hence, I found that we managed to established mutual rapport once the e-mail correspondences had started.

4.4 Method of interpretation and analysis

While open-ended interviews are a useful tool for achieving qualitative data, the method of data interpretation also requires thorough consideration. Silverman (2006, p.381) argues that “(n)aiive interviewers believe that the supposed limits of quantitative research are overcome by an open-ended interview schedule and a desire to catch 'authentic' experience” as he stresses the importance in avoiding to treat “the actor’s point of view as an explanation” (ibid).

My method of data interpretation has been close to what Silverman (2006, p.111, p.118) refers to as the “constructionist approach” in which the researcher interprets interview data as representations (or accounts) of the respondents’ experiences, rather than as direct facts.

In terms of my study, this means that I have considered the interview responses as the respondents’
own accounts of their experiences, rather than focusing on whether their statements are “true” or “false”. A statement such as “media hides the truth about immigration” in the interviews has hence been treated as the respondent’s own account. No attempts have, in such a situation, been made at finding out whether their statements around media’s reporting can be justified or not. Instead the focus has been on applying the previously outlined theories to the collected data with the aim to identify the respondents’ critique of media and society and analyze the possible implications of their media habits.

Furthermore, the respondents' stated media habits outlined in the next chapter (4.4) also need to be interpreted through the constructionist approach. This means that these statements can only be treated as representations of the respondents' experiences of their media habits, rather than as a completely accurate list of their actual media habits.

It is also worth repeating that although the study’s collected data can help understand what an AIIM user’s motivations may be, the empirical data gained from the study’s 13 respondents can not represent ALL AIIM users (Silverman 2006).

4.5 Respondents
This chapter introduces the 13 respondents and their media habits. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important to remember that these statements are solely based on the respondents own accounts and may or may not be an accurate representation of their actual media habits in reality.

Sandra
A 32 year old web developer. She states that she spends a few hours a day consuming both EJM and AIIM, but mainly uses AIIM as a complement to mainstream media, to read about topics where she “know(s) that mainstream media consciously leave out facts”. She explains that she rarely enters a news web page with the purpose of reading the whole thing as she consumes most of her news through links on her Twitter feed and that her most commonly visited AIIM is Nyheter Idag.

Andreas
Andreas lives in a multicultural area of one of Sweden’s larger towns. He states that his media consumption is comprised of approximately 40 % “mainstream media”, 30 % AIIM and 30 % social media and that, out of the available AIIM, he prefers Fria Tider, but sometimes reads Avpixlat and “almost never” Exponerat. State
Larry

A 76 year old who, according to his own statements, spends around six hours a day on his computer, consuming 10% online newspapers, 40 %, 30 % Facebook and 20 % watching BBC and CNN. His favourite AIIM are Snapphane med JC, Petterssons blogg, Johan Westerholm and Ledarsidorna.se. Furthermore, he admits to the occasional visit to anti-racist site Expo “to see who they hate at the moment”.

Thomas

Thomas is a 54 year old musician/artist who gives the following statement on his own daily media consumption: 4-6 hours, comprised of:

Göteborgsposten (subscriber) max. one hour

Metro (paper copy) approx. 20 min.

Different articles in SvD, Aftonbladet, GT/Expressen, DN (and more) online approx.20 min.

SVT Aktuellt, Rapport, TV4 Nyheter approx.1,5 hour.

Avpixlat, Petterssonsblogg, Fria Tider, Tobbesmedieblogg and more, approx 1 hour.

Not a member of any social networking sites but sometimes reads other people's posts on Twitter and Facebook (max. 20 minutes a day)

Maria

Maria has not provided a description of age or occupation or any other personal details. She argues that although she only spends around five hours a week consuming media, she reads fast and manages to “go through a lot” during those hours. She also explains that she consumes most of her news through links on her social media feed, “whatever catches her interest at the moment”.

John

John is a 57 year old travel agent who states that he spends four hours a day consuming “mainstream media” and three hours a day on “alternative media”.

Peter

Peter is 67 year old retired engineer. He claims that he is not on any social media, but that he spends around one hour on Aftonbladet, Göteborgsposten and SVT Nyheter and around half an hour on Avpixlat each day.
Josef

An 18 year old student who states that he reads Aftonbladet several times a day and Avpixlat a few times a week.

Johannes

Johannes is a 27 year old freelance writer who writes for an anti-immigration website. He argues that his own daily media consumption depends on time, but he emphasizes the importance of consuming a wide range of media, from several different sources. He reads both Swedish and German “MSM” and “AM” and argues that German “alternative media” have a far higher intellectual level than the Swedish equivalents and that, as a Lutheran, he also reads a number of Lutheran publications.

Olle

Olle is 74 years old and retired. According to his own statement, he spends approximately 90-120 minutes a day on news consumption, half of which is spent on “alternative media” and half of which is spent on Dagens Nyheter and on the television news. However, he emphasizes the fact Dagens Nyheter and the television news are only consumed as a pastime and not to “gather information”.

Karl-Erik

Karl-Erik is a 74 year old who claims that he doesn't consume any “mainstream media” apart from Swedish Radio's P1 and sometimes random articles from the morning newspapers, but only through linking on social media, and that he daily visits “alternative media” such as Fria Tider and Avpixlat. He sees Flashback and Facebook as news consumption and that's where he spends most of his daily media time (approx. one hour a day), including the links from these sites that he follows to other news sites.

Jan

Jan hasn't provided any details of his age and occupations as he specifically asks to be introduced as “a grumpy old man” in the report. He states that he spends around 2-3 hours a day on news consumption including: Dagens Eko, Aktuellt, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Swedish Radio's P1, SVT, Erixon, ledarsidorna, Thoralf Alfssoon, Avpixlat, Fria Tider and Flashback.

Börje

Börje is 55 years on and on disability pension. He states that he spends around two hours a day consuming news, mainly SVT Nyheter (approx.1/3 of the time) and that his favourite AIIM is Fria Tider, which is the site that he most frequently read and share on Facebook.
5. Analysis

5.1 Social trust
In order to find out if there's a connection between the respondents media choices and their level of trust in society, several questions were asked about their trust in societal institutions. Almost all of the respondents stated that they hold no, or a very low level of, trust in society, which is in line with Mongomery et.al. (2016)'s research project that shows a strong connection between anti-immigration politics and a low level of trust in society. Furthermore, during the interviews several of the respondents' shared stories about their own personal experiences and life situations to demonstrate the reasons for this. Jan explains that his low level of trust in society started with a traumatic experience nearly 20 years ago:

“My trust in social institutions is plummeting. It really started with my mother's stroke in 1998... A drooling, half-paralyzed old woman was put in a car and sent home as her medical treatment was considered finished.”

-Jan, my translation

Several other respondents point to similar situations in which society has let them or their families down as a reason for their distrust in society. Considering the fact that only one out of 13 respondents expresses a high level of trust in society, there appears to be a connection between their social distrust and their interest in AIIM.

Andreas even argues that his consumption of AIIM has actually directly contributed to his low level of trust in society.

"I hold a relatively low level of trust in all social institutions but it wasn’t that much higher even 30 years ago. Alternative media has maybe, or actually definitely, strengthened that image.”

-Andreas, my translation

According to Miller et.al.'s (2016) theory of conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning, this finding further suggests that the respondents are likely to endorse conspiracy theories, if their social distrust is combined with ideological motivation.
Bearing their social distrust in mind, the following two sub-chapters further identifies the respondents' points of social critique in the context of the fragmentation thesis/echo chamber phenomenon.

5.1.1 “Democratorship”
When discussing society and democracy, the word “democratorship” (Swedish: demokratur) frequently appears as several respondents argue that Sweden is in fact a dictatorship disguised as a democracy.

“We live in a democratorship. Most of the voters can only make an impact every fourth year – when there’s an election. And they can barely affect then – as most of the established parties share the same politics, possibly with the exception of the Sweden Democrats. The individual voter's influence is basically reduced to nothing and those in power do not encourage voters to get involved and increase their influence. It feels like we are living in a dictatorship in disguise.”

-Börje, my translation

Although the term “democratorship” is said to derive from the book Deımocrature: Comment les meidias transforment la deìmocratie by sociologist Gérard Mermet (1987), most of the respondents mention Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg in reference to the term.

When searching for the term online, the following quote, credited to Vilhelm Moberg (1965) and (1984) appears on several other AIIM:

“In a democratorship, there are public and free elections, freedom of opinion formally exists but the politics and the mass media are dominated by an establishment that believes that only some opinions should be allowed to be expressed. As a consequence of this, the citizens are led to live under the false impression that they are provided with a diverse and objective representation of reality. The oppression of opinion is well hidden, the free debate strangled”

-Vilhelm Moberg, cited in Pettersons blogg, Exponerat and Fria Tider, my translation

However, this quote can according to Holt (2016, p.135) neither be found in Moberg's I egen sak:
Obekväma inlägg i det offentliga samtalet (1984) nor in his article titled Sverige – en demokratur? from DN Dec 14th 1965. And, remarkably, the AIIM Exponerat argues that this quote is in fact Moberg’s “brilliant” interpretation of Mermet’s definition of the word “democrat-sh”ip, despite the fact that Moberg passed away nearly a decade before Mermet’s book was published (Agerstig 2014).

However, despite the dispute around the origin of the word “democrat-sh”ip, the respondents who mention it seem to base it on the quote above, (mis)credited to Moberg by several AIIM, and their usage of this term will hence be understood in reference to this “quote” in this analysis. This confusion around the origins of the term and the above “quote” further shows AIIM's influence on the respondents as several of them seem to base their understanding of the term on AIIM's definition.

According to Olle, AIIM play a crucial role in liberating society from oppression as he argues that the difference between the “democrat-sh”ip Sweden and totalitarian states North Korea, China and Russia is their ability to silence alternative media:

"No, we don’t live in a democracy. In order for a country to be called a democracy, freedom to choose your opinion is not enough. That freedom exists even in dictatorships. In a democracy, you should also have the right to express your opinion and propagate for it. And that freedom doesn’t exist in Sweden. Sweden can, hence, not be categorized as a democratic country in the correct meaning of the word. It belongs with the earlier mentioned group of countries [North Korea, China, Russia]. Those countries just happen to be better at silencing alternative media."

-Olle, my translation

5.1.2 Political opposition
Due to their perception of Sweden as a ”democrat-sh”ip where freedom of speech is conditional, many of the respondents argue that they feel excluded from the public debate on immigration related issues.

Sandra and Peter reacted to DN’s article “Vreden på Östermalm” from March 20th (Af Kleen 2016) in which former moderate cultural minister Lena Adelshon Liljeroth admitted to sometimes visiting the AIIM Avpixlat, something that she later got criticized for (Studio Ett 2016), and both used this
as an example to demonstrate how people who consume AIIM get stigmatized and excluded from the public debate.

"It’s hard to stigmatize people for reading Expressen instead of Aftonbladet (even if that also used to be a sensitive issue). But to stigmatize people for reading and commenting on Avpixlat appears to be perfectly fine”

-Sandra, my translation

Peter even compares the critique of Adelhson Liljeroth’s Avpixlat consumption to the inquisition:

“This is almost like medieval times with the inquisition! Don’t read anything else than what’s in MSM, everything else is heresy and if you do you will be portrayed as an apostate!

What happened to freedom of speech?”

-Peter, my translation

According to some of the respondents, this feeling of exclusion and not having the “right” opinion contributes to their complete withdrawal from any debates with opponents. This is the case for Olle, who argues that he has completely given up on debating with the “politically correct” on social media due to this reason:

“I don't take any political discussions at all [on social media]. Since my opponents, the politically correct people, lack in factual arguments, they immediately turn to personal attacks, “racist” and more, even my old age is used against me. Not that I'm easily offended but this slandering distracts from the topic. So, I have stopped that”.

-Olle, my translation

However, chosen withdrawal from debates with political opponents is not the case for all respondents as a few argue that they still actively seek out people with different political beliefs for debate and discussion. Sandra argues that she is one of those who make conscious attempts to include people of different beliefs and opinions in their social media feeds, but that it is not always
The problem is that many – even people in the public eye – who are very positive to immigration assume that all the critics are the same and then you end up in block-lists where you find yourself blocked by people that you’ve never talk to before, because you are categorized as belonging to ‘the evil’, as soon as you sympathize with columnist and debaters like the previously mentioned [Tino Sanandaji].

-Sandra, my translation

Whether it is through chosen withdrawal (as for Olle) or an alleged exclusion by opponents (as per Sandra’s example) or a mix of both, it is arguably a problem when AIIM users do not get their opinions challenged and contested by people of different political views as this strengthens the echo chamber effect as it can lead to group polarization, which may breed extremism (Sunstein 1999, p.23, Gitlin 1998, p.170)

5.2 Media critique

This chapter is dedicated to analyzing the respondents’ critique of established journalistic media, with a particular focus on how they use the type of radical media critique that is normally directed from the left while, paradoxically, criticizing EJM for their “left-wing” ideology.

Particularly noteworthy in this section is how several of the respondents criticize EJM for their “agenda setting”, while they at the same time seem to let EJM set the agenda as they mainly use AIIM to “find the facts” behind what they have originally read in EJM (such as perpetrators’ ethnicity).

That being said, it is worth noting that this does not strictly apply to all respondents. Olle argues that AIIM is his main source of information and that he only consumes EJM at times to “kill time” and for entertainment rather than to gather information.

“I don’t feel the need to use both methods for gathering information [AIIM and EJM], I read Dagens Nyheter and watch the television news, but that’s more as a pastime.”

Olle, my translation

And as an example, he explains that Dagens Nyheter’s cultural pages are mainly used for
“Dagens Nyheter’s cultural section which is strongly feminist and left wing can be used for entertainment and something to laugh at.”

Olle, my translation

However, even though Olle argues that he does not use EJM for information, Holt’s study on AIIM (2016, p.163) shows that over 60 % of AIIM’s articles are based on articles from EJM which means that EJM, still set the agenda for the news that Olle and other AIIM users consume, albeit indirectly.

5.2.1 Bias and objectivity

All respondents argue that EJM’s reporting is biased when it comes to immigration related issues and some even claim that it is full of lies. A common view among the respondents is that EJM are portraying the immigration crisis as a humanitarian project that all should contribute to and that the Swedes who do not want to help out are ”evil”. Johannes argues that this is a major problem as he believes that the Swedish culture is seriously threatened by immigration:

“The basic picture that's mediated is that we should feel very sorry for the immigrants and that the Swedes who object are just evil – this happens even though the Swedish culture is seriously threatened”

-Johannes, my translation

And many, like Peter below, argue that all the negative aspects of immigration are silenced in EJM:

“[MSM] are biased to the highest possible degree since they in every way portray immigration as a humanitarian project that we should all contribute to and help with. All negative angles on this topic are silenced”.

-Peter, my translation

Although all respondents agree that most of EJM are biased and that they ”hide” negative aspects of immigration, an overarching consensus around the actual reasons as to why EJM
are hiding facts does not seem to exist as the respondents point in several different directions here. That being said, there seems to be a general idea of EJM as being "too left wing" to stay objective, while it is also insinuated that journalists who are not "politically correct" do not voice their opinions, due to fear of isolation, exclusion and/or career difficulties. Several of the respondents give Swedish journalist and blogger Marcus Birro as an example of what can happen to journalists if they do not obey the political correct rules, referring to a blog entry in which he argues that he got fired from tabloid newspaper Expressen because he had earlier participated in an interview in a podcast produced by anti-immigration website Exponerat (Birro 2014).

There is also another type of fear that frequents on the topic of why EJM are biased, namely “the fear of being called racist” as several respondents argue that this is one of the main factors that prevent journalists from straying off the path of political correctness:

"There’s a fear of not showing that you are generally positive about immigrants, the fear of being called racist."
-Larry, my translation

Olle, on the other hand, simply argues that the reasons for EJM's alleged bias is because they want to "blame the Swedes":

"The purpose is to hide the negative consequences of immigration and to blame the Swedes".
-Olle, my translation

It appears as if the respondents are using a mix of distribution critique and recognition critique here as they criticize EJM for their representations (the “poor” immigrants, the “humanitarian project”, the “evil Swede”...) as well as their ideology (“too left-wing”) (Jakobsson 2014, p.68). This discussion will be further developed in the theoretical discussion in chapter 6.

Although all of the previously listed theories on radical media critique are partly applicable to the respondents' critique of bias and lack of objectivity in EJM, the interview responses fail at providing a clear, consensual idea as to why EJM are hiding facts around immigration and excluding people who try to reveal the facts. In most forms of leftist radical media critique, EJM is
critiqued in the context of capitalism and, thus, also for their capitalist interests, but when a similar form of media critique is used from this other direction, the ideas of what EJM gain from hiding information on immigration and excluding those who break the political correct codes seem divided among the respondents, some pointing to “fear” and other to journalism as a traditionally “leftist” profession and some simply referring to EJM's “love of immigrants” and “Sweden-hate” as the main reasons behind their bias.

5.2.2 Agenda setting
Several respondents use the term ”agenda setting” in their critique of EJM. As stated in the theoretical chapter, this term derives from Max McCombs and Donald Shaw's (1972) study on the correlation between media's reporting and the public's perception of the most important issues in the 1968 American election and has later been used by media scholars such as Herman & Chomsky (1988/2002) to describe media's power to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.

However, upon an internet search on ”agenda setting”, it appears as if the term has been used on various AIIM in the past few years, particularly in reference to an article by DN's editor-in-chief Peter Wolodarski (2013), in which he uses the term to describe DN's own reporting (Avpixlat 2015, Fria Tider 2014, Petersson 2015). As per the case of the miscredited “quote” about the Swedish “democratorship”, it appears as if several of the respondents even here are influenced by AIIM's description of the term, without going back to the original sources.

As per the AIIM mentioned above, Jan also argues that this term derives from Peter Wolodarski and further describes the word as ”self-explanatory”:

“Agenda setting journalism has existed during the past 30 years but was named by Peter Wolodarski, editor-in-chief at Dagens Nyheter. You can tell by the name what it concerns. It's about setting the agenda for what should be treated as news and how journalism can influence social development”

-Jan, my translation

Andreas further sees elitism among EJM as the reason behind agenda-setting journalism:
”[MSM] are biased and have unfortunately been so for a long time. Journalism is neither objective nor investigative, but rather agenda setting. Probably because the journalists think that most people are stupider than they are and need to be educated to be as ‘good’ as them.”

-Andreas, my translation

Although these respondents criticize the agenda-setting functions of EJM, I find that there is an obvious paradox here as all of the respondents in fact consume EJM to a certain extent and, furthermore, show a tendency to discuss and exemplify their points through examples from EJM in the interviews. This notion is further strengthened by Holt's (2016) findings that EJM to a large extent set the agenda for AIIM's news reporting.

5.2.3 Other “leftist” topics – feminim and gender roles

When asked about their view on media's reporting on topics that do not relate to immigration, many respondents provided a long list of other topics in which they also consider EJM biased and highly subjective. The main critique appears to be of an alleged emphasis on what the respondents refer to as typical “leftist” topics such as feminism, gender and environment. And Karl-Johan argues that this is particularly prominent on the children's TV-channel “barnkanalen”:

"Try watcing "barnkanalen". They constantly try to include leftist topics, such as diversity/immigration, environment and hbtq to force feed the kids with. They have basically decided that it is the most important thing in the world that Swedish children get used to seeing little girls in veils and that they have to be educated about homosexuality."

-Karl Johan, my translation

Johannes even argues that EJM are in fact “far more biased” when it comes to these topics than they are in regards to immigration-related issues:

“Yes, I consider media's reporting biased in a wide range of topics, where immigration is not the worst. I would, for example, say that they are far more biased in issues concerning, for example, gender equality and feminism. Within these topics, virtually no one with a different perspective
(traditional gender roles, for example) get to voice their opinion”.

-Johannes, my translation

The fact that many respondents' distrust in EJM goes beyond immigration-related issues indicates that their distrust in EJM may simply be based on the fact that EJM's reporting simply do not comply with their own political views.

However, I would argue that this could be partly due to participation bias, since the individuals who chose to participate in my study are generally interested in politics and also very active users of different forms of media (Keeble et.al. 2013).

5.3 Reflections on news consumption in a fragmented digital landscape

Most of the respondents can, based on their own accounts, be considered as ”news seekers” to a certain extent, as most of them state that they do not only consume both AIIM and EJM but also spend time on various social networking sites, discussing, debating and analyzing news events (see presentations of the respondents in section 4.4 for further details on their news consumption). This chapter will further analyze their own reflections around their media usage as well as their perceptions of the neutrality and objectivity of AIIM as well as that of their own social media feed.

Thomas and Sandra both argue that it is in fact more difficult to know what information to trust in the digital age, due to the vast amount of information available which can contribute to fragmentation, and Thomas points to a general ”confusion”, as he states that this has given him some ”conspiratorial” tendencies:

"In a way, things were easier a few decades ago, for better or for worse, one simply had to trust newspapers and TV/radio and everything was a whole lot slower. It's obviously a good thing that things have change but I will have to admit that I, among many others, have some ”conspiratorial” tendencies. I think that the more information there is available, the more disinformation and rumours are created, obviously not just around immigration. People are probably generally more confused now than 30 years ago.”

-Thomas, my translation

Sandra further points to the risks with a fragmentation of media as she argues that it can contribute
to a distorted view on reality:

"As a reader, you don't get an objective picture from just one category of media, it's through reading many sources and discussions that you get a broader and hopefully more justifying picture of reality."

-Sandra, my translation

Karl-Johan agrees with Sandra’s statement but further argues that this is more of a problem "on the left":

"I would argue that it actually is a problem when people choose to only consume media from their own political group's production – but that the problem is a lot bigger on the left side."

-Karl-Johan, my translation

Although the respondents’ level of self-critical thinking seem to differ here as Thomas refers to himself as "conspiratorial" whereas Karl-Johan claims that the problem is more prominent "on the left", what these respondents still have in common is that they all clearly reflect over the negative implications of a fragmented media consumption.

Olle, on the other hand, argues that there is no need to read different sources of information as AIIM "hold the truth":

"Everything in politically correct media that can be fact-checked is wrong, this becomes particularly evident on topics where you are an expert yourself. From this, I draw the conclusion that even the stuff that I can’t fact-check is wrong. It may sound prejudicial, but I assume that politically correct media only serve lies and I don’t feel the need to check any sources. I consume politically correct media more as entertainment than as a source of information. Alternative media on the other hand, I trust completely and, hence, don’t feel the need to check any sources. AM don’t have to lie and distort, just presenting reality is enough."

-Olle, my translation
It seems as if the views on fragmentation strongly differ between the respondents as some stress the importance of consuming different media sources to get different perspectives whereas others argue that just AIIM is enough as they simply hold the truth.

It is important to once again emphasize the fact that this is only based on the respondents own accounts and it is hence very difficult to draw any firm conclusions as to how their view on fragmentation can actually influence their media habits. However, the next two sub chapters attempt to analyze the respondents’ levels of self-scrutiny and critique as they focus on their attitudes toward the neutrality and objectivity of AIIM as well as that of their own social media feeds. Their attitude toward EJM is not included here as this subject has been previously analyzed in chapter 5.2.

5.3.1 Critique of AIIM
While the respondents all argue that EJM are extremely biased when it comes to their reporting on immigration related issues, their attitude toward AIIM’s level of neutrality and objectivity is somewhat more complex, with attitudes ranging from ”they are extremely biased” to ”they are completely objective”.

Larry agrees with the latter as he argues that AIIM are:

"Objective, tell the truth about what it's like /___. The truth is often silenced, in crime no information about who committed the crime, refugee centre fights no ethnicity is given, it's written with the intended interpretation that it's white Swedes who fight.”

-Larry, my translation

Olle is also positive to AIIM’s overall reporting but his answer appears a bit diffuse as he argues for some sort of ”bias toward the truth” in AIIM:

"Nothing wrong with being biased if you are open about it. AM are open about presenting what is hidden by others which is choosing a side. In this case, the truth.”

-Olle, my translation

On the other side of the spectrum, there are several respondents who, like Thomas below, argue that AIIM are in fact the opposite of objective as they only focus on the negative aspects of
immigration:

"AM are extremely biased, they're all based on mocking MSM and finding as much immigration related crime as possible. There are huge amounts of racists in the comment sections”.

-Thomas, my translation

Peter agrees with Thomas’ skeptical view on AIIM’s objectivity but further argues that they need to be consumed as a complement to EJM as there are no better options:

"The reports from Avpixlat are angled and biased as they completely take the standpoint that immigration is wrong. But since it is the only way to get a picture of what's happening in Sweden, one has to read both PK [politically correct]-media and Avpixlat and create one's own opinion as far as it's possible."

-Peter, my translation

It is clear from these answers that the perception of AIIM's objectivity and neutrality strongly differ between the respondents but it is, yet again, important to emphasize the fact that they all still consume AIIM, regardless of their critique and the reasons for their consumption.

5.3.2 Awareness of filter bubbles

Determining the respondents’ awareness of algorithmic functions in their social media feed also deemed challenging as a straight question about this was, rather unsurprisingly, met with confusion, rather than any thorough reflections. However, after re-formulating the questions to revolve around their perception of the “neutrality” and "objectivity” of their social media feed, a majority of the respondents argued that their Facebook feed is clearly biased but that they do not find that problematic, which implies an existence of social media echo chambers among the respondents (Sunstein 1999, Couldry 2005, Eslami et.al. 2015).

Although arguing that he frequently participates in debates with people of other political beliefs on the online debate forum Flashback, Karl-Johan explains that Facebook is a place where he excludes all political opposition:
"My Facebook is ‘water-proof’ against people who have opinions that differ from mine. I almost don’t have any friends that continuously post politically coloured posts where the political points are different to mine. And I don’t ‘follow’ any political opponents."

-Karl Johan, my translation

On a similar note, Jan also explains that he mainly surrounds himself with other immigration critics on Facebook:

"The news feed on my Facebook is to a high extent biased and immigration critical. Most of my Facebook friends are tired, annoyed and frustrated because of the current asylum politics."

-Jan, my translation

And he continues to explain that he chooses what to include on his Facebook page, which further implies an unawareness of algorithmic functions:

"I’m in charge of my own Facebook feed. Weirdos are blocked and all adverts are blocked."

-Jan, my translation

While Olle explains that his Facebook page is completely adapted to AIIM and immigration critical Facebook groups he further argues that this does not prevent it from being neutral:

"I don’t see a contradiction between neutrality and adjustment in this case. My news feed is completely adjusted to alternative media and Facebook groups that share my opinions more or less. I consider this feed neutral enough."

-Olle, my translation

It is worth noting that there are exceptions here as a few of the respondents argue that they do not use any social media (se presentations in 4.4), a couple argue that they are aware that algorithms in their news feed but they ”are not entirely sure of how they work” and only one respondent claims to make conscious attempts at engaging in debates with people of different opinions on social media.
However, it is also evident from the presentations in chapter 4.4 that several respondents consume most of their news through links on social media, which suggests that algorithmic functions may adjust their news consumption after their own interests even if they make conscious efforts to keep it as neutral and objective as possible (Eslami et al. 2015).
6. Theoretical discussion

Starting with theories of radical media critique and then moving on to the fragmentation thesis, this chapter seeks to discuss and contextualize the empirical findings in relation to earlier listed theories and research and in doing so, answer the research questions outlined in the introductory chapter of the thesis.

6.2 Motivations for AIIM usage/critiques of EJM

In terms of the respondents' critique of EJM, they all appear rather radical in their media critique, and some respondents even argue that EJM should be referred to as "old media" as "all things old will eventually die".

Their media critique can be further demonstrated through another look at Jakobsson's table of the three varieties of radical media critique below. With the exception of the row named “subject of critique”, the respondents' answers tick all of these boxes in their critique of EJM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
<th>Openness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject of critique, who critiques on whose behalf?</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Gender, ethnicity etc...</td>
<td>Internet user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique’s normative standpoint?</td>
<td>Distribution of resources</td>
<td>Recognition of differences</td>
<td>Free communication, free information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object of critique, what is being criticised?</td>
<td>Media ideology</td>
<td>Media representations</td>
<td>Media infrastructure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Three types of radical media critique (Jakobsson 2014:68, my translation)

Here, this table would in fact work perfectly to illustrate the respondents' critique IF the words “class”, “gender, ethnicity etc...” were substituted for “anti-immigration groups” and “internet user” were more specified to AIIM user as per below.
To clarify here, the “anti-immigration groups” that I am referring to are the respondents and other people who are against immigration. Several other terms could have been used here as well but the term anti-immigration have been used for consistency, considering the term “anti-immigration internet media” that have been used throughout this report. Now, the table above can be used to illustrate the respondents' points of media critique through their earlier comments and answers in chapter 5.

To start with critiques of distribution, this type of media critique is used by the respondents in their critique of EJM's ideology as “politically correct” and “too left-wing”. As opposed to the propaganda model and similar critiques of distribution, the respondents do not, however, base their critique on any financial interests that would benefit EJM. Instead, their critique seem to only be based on the fact that EJM’s ideology does not comply with that of their own (Jakobsson 2014, p-57ff).

Furthermore, the term agenda-setting, which is commonly used in critiques of distribution, constantly appear in the respondents' critique of EJM. Their usage of this term as a critique of EJM is interesting as Holt's (2016) study shows that AIIM is in fact heavily reliant on EJM's articles in their own reporting. This means that while AIIM's users critique EJM for their agenda-setting reporting, AIIM do in fact let EJM set the agenda as they base their content on what has earlier been published in EJM. I find that this paradoxical use of the term is an example of a contradiction in their critique of EJM. Furthermore, an internet search on the term agenda-setting shows that this usage of the term agenda-setting as a critique of EJM frequents on several AIIM (Avpixlat 2015, Fria Tider 2014, Petersson 2015). I would further argue that this finding indicates the existence of echo chambers within AIIM as the respondents here seem to echo what they have read on AIIM.
While critiques of distribution are usually directed from a feminist perspective toward the media representation of marginalized groups (and constant lack thereof) with a focus on gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, this type of critique is strikingly similar to that of the respondents as they appear to put anti-immigration groups as a marginalized Other (Jakobsson 2014, p.62). Several of the respondents use this type of critique as they do not only argue that they are constantly excluded from the politically correct hegemony but they also claim that journalists lie and distort due to a fear of being called racist (see chapter 5.2.1). Although these types of comments from the respondents bear striking similarities to critiques of recognition of marginalized groups such as HBTQ persons and cultural minorities as expressed by the feminist left, these comments appear rather contradictory when directed from the anti-immigration right-wing side as the respondents simultaneously critique EJM for actually recognizing and including marginalized groups in their reporting (see chapter 5.2.3).

Another example of a contradiction of this nature is how the AIIM Avpixlat (2016) made a film where they mock Södertörn University for its alleged focus on identity politics, while this view of AIIM users as a marginalized sub group in fact bears strikingly similarities to the identity politics of gender as expressed by the feminist left (Fraser 2000).

Furthermore, several of the respondents touch on critiques of openness in their critique of EJM as they point at freedom of information and communication online (AIIM) as key to breaking the politically correct hegemony (EJM) and one of the respondents even argue that AIIM is the only thing that separates Sweden from countries such as North Korea, China and Russia. Although critiques of openness are usually politically agnostic, the respondents seem to view AIIM in particular as the reason why information and communication should be open to all, as they argue that anti-immigration groups are excluded from expressing their opinions in other places (Jakobsson 2014, p.64ff).

This notion of AIIM users as a marginalized excluded sub-group and AIIM as the solution to social issues brings us back to the discussion around the term “alternative media” as previously outlined in the background chapter of this report. Based on Andersson (2012) as well as Sandoval & Fuchs' (2010) reasoning around the term “alternative media” as social movements for equality, the fact that the respondents even refer to AIIM as “alternative”, further demonstrates how they thrive on a siege mentality where AIIM users are marginalized minority that is excluded by media, society and the whole establishment.
Key findings on critiques of media/society and motivations for using AIIM:

- Radical in their critique of media and society
- Appear to view themselves (AIIM consumers) as an oppressed, marginalized sub-group that is excluded in/by EJM
- AIIM as a solution to their exclusion by EJM

Contradictions in their accounts that indicate that they are influenced by AIIM and echo chambers:

- Contradictory usage of terminology (agenda-setting, democratoship, identity politics etc.), appear to echo AIIM in many cases
- Lack consensual conclusions as to why EJM are hiding facts about immigration
- Using left-wing arguments to critique EJM for being too left-wing

6.2 Social trust and political knowledge

The combination of a low level of social trust and a high level of interest in politics/strong (right-wing) political beliefs are traits that almost all of the respondents possess.

Based on earlier research that show a connection between a low level of trust in society and an interest in anti-immigration politics (Montgomery et.al. 2016) as well as Miller et al.'s (2016) theory of conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning, the respondents' trust in society was explored through a straight question (see appendix 3-4), to which most of the respondents (12 out of 13) answered that they hold “low” or “no” trust in social institutions. Some of the respondents complemented their answer with examples of traumatic or disappointing experiences that they pointed to as reasons for their low level of trust in society and one respondent even argued that AIIM has in fact contributed to his distrust in society.

This low level of trust in society is perfectly in line with Montgomery et.al.'s (2016) that shows a connection between distrust in society and anti-immigration politics. This interest in anti-immigration politics is arguably related to their consumption of AIIM, an argument which is supported by the finding that most of the respondents are highly politically knowledgeable.

The respondents were never asked which political party they vote for, partly because I did not want to risk damaging the established rapport through asking questions of such private nature and partly
because I found that their political beliefs were already insinuated in their consumption of AIIM and critique of EJM.

Not only did several of the respondents mention right-wing journalists and writers such as Ivar Arpi and Alice Teodorescu as “good” and “objective” journalists (upon an Internet search, these journalists are also mentioned in similar terms on various AIIM such as Avpixlat, Petterssons gör skillnad! and Nyheter Idag, which further illustrates the possible influence of AIIM’s and echo chambers on the respondents), but they also directed sharp critique at EJM for an alleged focus on “leftist” topics. Some of the respondents even argue that immigration “is not the worst” topic in terms of EJM's alleged bias and lack of neutrality and several mention “leftist” topics such as gender equality and environmental issues as examples of when EJM's reporting is biased.

The fact that many of the respondents criticize EJM for their “left-wing bias”, insinuates an interest in politics and rather strong (right-wing) political beliefs. Although this finding could also be effected by participation bias as it could be argued that people with strong (anti-immigration) political beliefs are more likely than others to participate in a study on anti-immigration media (Keeble et.al. 2013), it is still an important finding when interpreted through Miller et.al.’s (2016) theory of conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning.

In this theory, the authors identify a person who is most likely to endorse conspiracy theories, a person who possesses the following traits:

- Particular ideological worldview related to the conspiracy theory (political beliefs)
- Have the motivation to maintain that worldview (political beliefs)
- Lacks trust in social institutions

(ibid).

While I am not arguing that all AIIM are only made up out of conspiracy theories, this theory nevertheless applies to my study due to the strong connection between echo chambers and conspiracy theories. Once a fake news story or conspiracy theory has spread within an echo chamber, it is difficult to debunk due to confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, which contributes to a polarization as demonstrated in the examples of the UK referendum and the US election in the introductory chapter of this report (Quattrociocchiet.al. 2015, Thoernéus 2016, Wong et.al. 2016). Hence Miller et.al.’s (2016) theory is certainly relevant in the context of echo chambers as well.
In terms of the traits above that combined contribute to likeliness in endorsing conspiracy theories, most of the respondents share a particular world view as well as a motivation to maintain it (based on their political beliefs) as well as a low level of trust in society. This means that they, according to this theory, are most likely to endorse conspiracy theories and thus also likely to be effected by echo chambers (ibid).

**Key findings on social trust and political knowledge:**
- Most of the respondents hold a low level of trust in combination with a high level of political knowledge, which according to Miller et.al. (2016)'s theory on conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning insinuates that they are likely to endorse conspiracy theories, and hence also be affected by echo chambers.

**6.3 The roles of EJM, AIIM and social media in the respondents’ news consumption**

Based on Strömbäck's (2015) conclusions that people who are normally considered as news-avoiders may in fact be very active consumers of alternative forms of media, the respondents should definitely be considered as news-seekers. Not only do they consume AIIM, but most of them spend a vast amount of time on various social networking sites as well as consuming EJM. It is worth mentioning participation bias once again here, as the fact that these individuals chose to participate in a study on media and immigration might insinuate that they are more involved and up-to-date on the topic than other AIIM consumers and hence may not be representative of this group as a whole (Keeble et.al. 2013). Furthermore, several of the respondents argue that they mainly consume news through links on social media, “whatever catches their eye at the moment”, and then clicks the link that take them to either AIIM or EJM.

This tendency to consume news through links on social media is an important finding as it means that those links are adapted to suit the user's interests and earlier activities, thus contributing to the echo chamber effect (Eslami et.al. 2015, Pariser 2011). Moreover, there awareness of algorithmic functions on social media among the respondents is low and those who are aware of algorithms state that they “are unsure of how they work”. According to Eslami et.al. (2015), the fact that most social media users are unaware of algorithms and filter bubbles is a problem as they may contribute to a distorted view of reality when unexposed. Yet, it is important to note here that this does not strictly apply to ALL of the respondents, as some of them argue that they do not even have social
media accounts.

These links then take the respondents' to either articles on EJM or directly to AIIM, depending on their social media feed and which articles the respondents' algoritmically adapted social media news feed would suggest.

Moreover, there is a tendency among the respondents to consume articles from EJM and then turning to AIIM to “find out the truth” (reading the anti-immigration angled version of the news story).

Although there are respondents who argue that they do not consume EJM at all, or that they only consume EJM “for a laugh”, these respondents would still consume news in AIIM that originates from EJM, as AIIM base most of their stories on material from EJM (Holt 2016). However, there appears to be a strong connection between what is published from EJM in AIIM and the examples from EJM that the respondents use to illustrate their examples in the interviews, which demonstrates AIIM's influence on the respondents, which further implies that they are affected by echo chambers.

Furthermore, there is a possible last step in the news consumption of this particular group as studies show that anti-immigration groups are more likely than others to spread and discuss news on social media, sometimes contributing to the false impression that anti-immigration forces are stronger than they actually are (Andersson Schwarz et.al. 2015, Larsson 2015). In this step, the respondents would spread and discuss articles on their social media feed, however the empirical findings have neither supported nor contradicted Andersson Schwarz et.al.’s (2015) and Larsson's (2015), as this type of conclusion can only be drawn through quantitative methods.

The below model is aimed at illustrating the connection between the respondents’ usage of AIIM, EJM and social media. Here, it is important to remember that not all respondents use social media and they would hence only consume AIIM and EJM.
Based on Cammaert’s (2008, p.5) illustration below, it appears as if the respondents' media worlds are closer to the counter-hegemonic sphericules that touch on the dominant public sphere (in this case, EJM) than to the anti-public spheres that Askanius & Mylonas (2015) discuss in terms of right-wing extremist media in Sweden and Denmark. Although the respondents consume AIIM that are politically oppositional to EJM, they are far more reliant on EJM than those who are isolated within these anti-public spheres.

Figure 2, *Fragmentation of the public sphere* (Cammaerts 2008, p.5)
To summarize, the analysis of the respondents' media habits lands in three key findings:

- Tendency to consume news through links on social media – insinuates that the respondents are affected by filter bubbles that contribute to the echo chamber effect.

- The respondents show low awareness of algorithmic functions on social media and those who are aware of the algorithms’ existence “do not exactly know how they work”. This further implies that those respondents who use social media are strongly affected by filter bubbles.

- All are news-seekers and all consume EJM in some way, even if their consumption of EJM is fragmented. This applies even to those who argue that they only consume AIIM, as these media base their reporting on material from EJM (Holt 2016). Hence, the respondents are not isolated in anti-public spheres, even if AIIM’s contents can arguably be considered as based on undemocratic values (Cammaerts 2008).
7. Conclusion

So, the answers to the two overarching questions that make up the aim for this thesis remain; Why do the respondents use AIIM and are they affected by echo chambers?

The answer to the first question firstly has to consider the respondents’ own perception of AIIM's role in society as well as their critique of EJM and society.

As previously stated, a siege mentality appear to exist among AIIM and their users, based on a view of Sweden as a “democratorship” where freedom of speech is restricted and those who are not “politically correct” are either excluded or remain silent due to a “fear of being called racist” and where AIIM is the solution to these social issues. While these arguments bear striking similarities to a line of radical media critique that are normally expressed from the left, they appear to be full of contradictions and paradoxes when directed from this anti-immigration right-wing side, as outlined in chapter 6.1. The main contradictions seem to appear as the respondents use left-wing arguments for criticizing EJM for their left-wing ideology and representation. Furthermore, the respondents’ contradictory use of terms such as agenda-setting and “democratorship” are also reflected in various AIIM, which suggests that the respondents’ point of critique are simply an echo of what is written in AIIM rather than based on individual critical thinking.

Due to these contradictions, I would argue that the respondents’ critique of EJM and society and their consumption of AIIM are in fact based on other factors, namely their strong political (anti-immigration right wing) beliefs as well as their distrust in society, as these are traits that most of them share. This is in line with Thorén’s (2015) findings that AIIM users will not start trusting EJM unless EJM changes to a discourse that complies with their own (anti-immigration) political beliefs as well as Montgomery et.al.’s (2016) study that shows a strong connection between a low level of trust in society and the anti-immigration political beliefs that the Sweden Democrats represent.

Moreover, my argument that social distrust and strong political beliefs are traits that are connected to AIIM consumption is strongly related to Miller et.al.’s (2016) theory of conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning as this theory outlines a person with a strong ideological worldview, and motivation for maintain that worldview, in combination with a low level of trust in society as more likely than others to endorse conspiracy theories. While I am in no position to argue that all AIIM solely consist of conspiracy theories, I still find that this theory is applicable in this context due to the strong relationship between conspiracy endorsement and echo chambers.
In the case of AIIM consumption I would consider adding a fourth component to Miller et.al’s (2016) list as per below:

- Particular ideological worldview related to the conspiracy theory (political beliefs)
- Have the motivation to maintain that worldview (political beliefs)
- Lacks trust in social institutions
- (News-seekers rather than news avoiders)

This fourth trait is based on the finding that most of the respondents appear to be news-seekers as they do not only consume both AIIM and EJM but are also very active on social media (see chapter 6.3). However, although this last trait is shared by most of the respondents, it has been placed within parentheses as I would argue that this could be due to participation bias; people who choose to participate in a study on immigration and media may be likelier than others to be particularly interested in those topics, and hence not representative of AIIM users as a group. Furthermore, this view of the respondents as news-seekers is only based on their own accounts, which means that it is their own experience of reality, and can hence not be treated as an objective fact (Keeble et.al. 2013, Silverman 2006, p.111, p.118). That being said, the finding that AIIM-consumers appear to be active news-seekers is partly supported by other studies, such as Andersson Schwarz et.al. (2015) and Larsson’s (2015), both of which suggest that anti-immigration forces and far-right wing groups are more active users of social media than other groups.

To summarize, I would, based on the above, argue that the respondents’ use AIIM due to their already existing strong (anti-immigration) political beliefs. I would further argue that their critique of EJM is based on the fact that their reporting do not comply with these anti-immigration right-wing world views. A lack of trust in society and a tendency to be active news consumers also appear to be traits that AIIM users share.

This brings us to the question of whether the respondents are affected by echo chambers or not. I would argue that they are, particularly due to their tendency to consume news through their algorithmically adapted social media feeds as well as their lack of awareness of filter bubbles and how they work. However this does not apply to all respondents as some of them argue that they do not even have social media accounts. Furthermore, stating that the respondents are affected by echo chambers may seem contradictory to the previous statements about the respondents’ news-seeking tendencies. To use Cammert’s (2008 p.5) illustration once more, I want to repeat my argument from chapter 6.3, that even though the respondents are affected in echo-chambers, these are not as far from the dominant public sphere as the anti-public spheres that Mylonas & Askanius (2015)
discuss in relation to right-wing extremist media in Sweden and Denmark. Instead the respondents’
echo chambers rather appear as counter public sphericules that challenge the dominant public
sphere, while they also depend on it.

Figure 2, *Fragmentation of the public sphere* (Cammaerts 2008, p.5)

Apart from their tendency to consume their news through links on social media and an unawareness
of how algorithms work, there are other signs that indicate that the respondents are affected by echo
chambers. One is their earlier mentioned tendency to repeat and echo AIIM’s usage of terms such
as agenda-setting and “democratopship” as well as the contradictions is their critique of EJM, which
also seem to indicate that their critique may be based on what is written in AIIM rather than indi-
vidual critical thinking.

Furthermore, many respondents argue that they consciously exclude political opposition and/or get
excluded from online discussions (see chapter 5.1.2), which also means that they would get their
opinions repeated rather than challenged when discussing politics online. However, this finding also
needs to be considered from a constructionist approach as it is based on the respondents’ own ac-
counts and should hence also just be considered as their own constructions of their experiences

Moreover, most of the respondents possess the traits that Miller et.al.’s (2016) list as components
for high likeliness of endorsing conspiracy theories, which further suggests that they are likely to be
affected by echo chambers, as these are strongly connected with conspiracy theories.
That being said, I find it important to repeat that these findings can only indicate the existence of echo chambers and that the respondents are affected by them as the existence of this phenomenon deemed difficult to prove through e-mail interviews.

However, while my aim to study the respondents’ echo chambers from a distance proved challenging, the research process did provide me with an insight of how echo chambers work, while I also gradually realized that I am strongly affected by the echo chamber phenomenon myself.

Firstly, the act of creating a new Facebook profile for the purpose of this study gave me an insight into the function of Facebook's algorithms as the act of “liking” and joining anti-immigration groups and pages quickly made the algorithms suggest similar groups, pages and friends, gradually exposing a new world of anti-immigration politics, xenophobia and blatant racism that I am usually oblivious to in the comfort of my own private filter bubble.

Furthermore, the research process showed me just how unpleasant it is to dive into an echo chamber that does not comply with your own political views and beliefs as I was constantly struggling with feelings of frustration and discomfort when scrolling through the news feed of my anti-immigration adapted Facebook profile. Suddenly, I appeared to be a parallel universe where no one shared my own political and ideological standpoints, which made me realize how strongly affected I am by the echo chamber phenomenon in my daily media consumption.

While this finding was neither formulated in the aim nor in the research questions, I wanted to mention this personal experience here as it demonstrates how filter bubbles as well as confirmation bias work, and shows how these can contribute to a polarized debate.

I will let Börje conclude this report with his own concerns over the ways in which his views appear to become more extreme when stepping into his anti-immigration echo chamber:

“Sometimes I feel like I can be myself but sometimes I find it hard, or even impossible, to control my emotions when I write on Facebook. I had a few beers last night and wrote a post based on emotions. I regretted it later that night and deleted the post. I hadn’t threatened anyone but I had "only" expressed my concern over all the violence in society and that I might have to start carrying a weapon in order to improve my chances of surviving any possible future physical assaults.”

-Börje, my translation
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9. Notes

1 Jan: “Min tillit till samhällets institutioner befinner sig i fritt fall. Det började egentligen med min mammas stroke 1998... En dreglande halvförlamad gammal kvinna ansågs medicinskt färdigbehandlad och sattes på färdtjänsten och transporterades hem.”

2 Andreas: “Jag känner relativt låg tillit till i princip alla samhällsinstitutioner men mitt förtroende var inte så jättemycket högre ens för trettio år sedan. Kanske, eller helt säkert förresten, så har alternativmedia förstärkt den bilden.”

3 Börje: ”Vi lever i en demokratur. De flesta väljare kan bara påverka vart fjärde år - då det är val. Knappt de ens kan påverka då - eftersom de etablerade partierna i stort sett alla har samma politik, möjligtvis med undantag för SD. Den enskilde väljarens inflytande är reducerat till i det närmaste noll och de som har makten uppmuntrar inte väljarna till att engagera sig och få ökat inflytande. Känns som vi lever i en förklädd diktatur.”


6 Sandra: ”Det är svårt stigmatisera folk för att de läser Expressen istället för Aftonbladet (även om det en gång i tiden var en känslig fråga). Men att stigmatisera folk för att de läser och kommenterar
på Avpixlat, fungerar uppenbarligen utmärkt.”

7 Peter: ”Detta liknar ju nästan medeltiden med inkvizitionen! Läs inte något annat än det som finns i MSM, allt annat är irrätor och gör du det hängs du ut som avfälling!
Vart tog det fria ordet vägen?”

8 Olle: ”Jag tar inga politiska diskussioner överhuvudtaget. Eftersom mina meningsmotståndare, PK-folket saknar sakargument går argumenten omedelbart över till personangrep, ”rasist” med mera, till och med min höga ålder använder man för att slå mig i skallen. Inte för att jag är lättkränt men smutskastningen tar ju energi och fokus från ämnet. Så det har jag slutat med.”

9 Sandra: ”Problemet är att många - även offentliga personer - som är väldigt positiva till invandring drar alla kritiker över en kam och sen hamnar man i block-listor, där man finner sig blockerad av personer man aldrig pratat med tidigare, eftersom man kategoriseras som tillhörande ”de onda”, så fort man har sympatier med krönikörer och debattörer som de tidigare nämnda.”

10 Olle: ”Jag känner inget behov av bägge metoderna för informationsinhämtning, att jag läser DN och ser TV-nyheterna handlar med om tidsfördriv. Jag anser att ”gammalmedia” eller ”gammelmedia” är bättre benämningar än MSM, det som är gammalt dör så småningom. Jag har alltså så stort förtroende för AM att de skulle räcka för mig. Idealet skulle alltså vara att PK-tidningarna i pappersformat gick omkull och att SVT blev privatiserat eller helst nedlagt. Det skulle vara en riktig demokratisering!”

11 Olle: ”Jag känner inget behov av bägge metoderna för informationsinhämtning, att jag läser DN och ser TV-nyheterna handlar med om tidsfördriv. Jag anser att ”gammalmedia” eller ”gammelmedia” är bättre benämningar än MSM, det som är gammalt dör så småningom. Jag har alltså så stort förtroende för AM att de skulle räcka för mig. Idealet skulle alltså vara att PK-tidningarna i pappersformat gick omkull och att SVT blev privatiserat eller helst nedlagt. Det skulle vara en riktig demokratisering!”

12 Johannes: ”Den grundläggande bilden som förmedlas det är mycket synd om invandrarna och att
de svenskar som protesterar bara är onda - detta trots att den svenska kulturen hotas av undergång"

13 Peter: "Den är i högsta grad partisk, då den på alla sätt framställer invandringen som ett humanitärt hjälpprojekt som vi alla ska hjälpa till och bidra till. Alla negativa vinklingar på detta ämne mörkas."

14 Olle: "Syftet är att dölja invandringens nackdelar och att skuldbelägga svenskarna."

15 Jan: "Agendasättande journalistik har funnits de senaste 30 åren men namngavs av Peter Wolodarski, chefred på DN. Det hörs på namnet vad det handlar om. Man ska sätta dagordningen för vad som är nyheter som kan påverka samhällsutvecklingen och hur man med journalistiken kan påverka samhällsutvecklingen."

16 Andreas: "Den är partisk och har varit det länge tyvärr. Journalistiken är vare sig objektiv eller undersökande utan snarast agendasättande. Förmodligen för att man (journalisterna) tror att de flesta är dummare än de själva och behöver uppföstras till att vara lika "goda" som de själva."

17 Larry: "Det finns en berörings-skräck för att inte visa sig, att man tycker positivt om invandrare generellt, rädsen att bli kallad rasist."

18 Karl-Johan: "Men pröva att titta på barnkanalen. Där försöker man ständigt ta vänsterens paradgrenar mångkultur/invandring, miljö och hbtq, och sondmata ungarna med. Man har helt enkelt bestämt sig för att det är världens viktigaste att svenska barn vänjs vid åsynen av små flickor i slöja, eller måste upplysas om homosexualitet."

19 Johannes: "Ja, jag anser medias rapportering vara partisk i en lång rad frågor, där invandringen inte är den värsta. Jag skulle t.ex. säga att man är långt mycket mera partisk i frågor som rör t.ex. jämställdhet och feminism. Här får i princip aldrig någon som försvårar ett annat perspektiv (t.ex. traditionella könsroller) komma till tals."

20 Sandra: "Som läsare får man inte en objektiv bild från någon enskild kategori av media, det är att
läsa många källor och diskussioner som ger en bredare och förhoppningsvis mer rättvisande bild av verkligheten”.

21 Thomas: ”På ett sätt var det ju enklare för ett antal decennier sedan, på gott och ont, man fick helt enkelt lita på tidningar och TV/radio och allt var ju mycket långsammare. Det är ju bra att det har ändrats givetvis, men jag får väl erkänna att jag, liksom många andra, har vissa ’’konspiratoriska’’ drag. Det är väl så att ju mer information det finns tillgänglig, desto mer desinformation och ryktesspridning bildas det, givetvis inte bara om invandring. Människor är nog överlag mer förvirrade nu än för 30 år sedan.”

22 Karl-Johan: ”Jag vill påstå att det faktiskt är ett problem när människor väljer att konsumera mediaendast ur den egna politiska gruppens produktion – men att problemet är betydligt större på vänsterkanten.”


24 Larry: ”Objektiva, talar sanning hur det är /____/. Sanningen är ofta mörkad, vid kriminalitet ingen information vem som utfört brottet, asylboende bråk ingen etnicitet anges, det skrives som det skall tydas att det är vita svenskar som bråkar.”


26 Thomas: ”AM är ju extremt partiska, allt går ju ut på att håna MSM och att hitta så mycket invandrarrelaterad brottslighet som möjligt. Det finns ju hur mycket rasister som helst i
kommentarsfälten."

27 Peter: "Rapporterna från Avpixlat är vinklade och partiska då de helt tar ståndpunkten att invandring är fel. Men då det är enda vägen att få någon bild av det som sker i Sverige får man läsa både PK-media och Avpixlat och bilda sig en egen uppfattning så gott det går."


29 Jan: "Nyhetsflödet på min facebook är till stor del partiskt och invandringskritiskt. De flesta av mina facebookvänner är trötta, irriterade och frustrerade på grund av den rådande asylinvandringspolitiken."

30 Jan: "Facebook's nyhetsflöde bestämmer jag själv. D v s knäppgökar blockeras och all reklam blockeras."

31 Olle: "Jag ser ingen motsättning mellan neutralitet och anpassning i detta fall. Mitt nyhetsflöde är helt anpassat till alternativmedia samt facebookgrupper vars åsikter jag delar mer eller mindre. Detta flöde anser jag vara tillräckligt neutralt i samma mening som i svaret på förra frågan. Det är väldigt sällan jag går in på någon specifik sida i syfte att "läsa den", utan det är snarare så att jag ser att någon nyhet eller krönika diskuteras mycket i flödet på Twitter och då brukar jag följa upp den och ev. nyheter som den baseras på."

32 Börje: "Ibland känner jag att jag kan vara mig själv, men ibland känner jag att det är svårt eller nästan omöjligt att ta med känslor då jag skriver på facebook. Hade druckit några öl igår och skrev ett inlägg baserat på känslor. Ängrade mig senare på kvällen och raderade inlägget. Hade inte skrivit nåt hotfullt eller förtaende, utan "bara" beskrivit min oro för våldet i samhället och att jag kanske i framtiden kommer att beväpna mig för att öka chanserna att överleva en eventuell fysisk attack mot min person."
Hi! I hope that it's ok that I post this here, otherwise admin may remove this post. I have noticed that immigration is a topic that a lot of this group's members are interested in and I'm currently doing my master's thesis around people's perception of how immigration is portrayed in different forms of media. I am currently looking for people who would be willing to participate in a shorter interview, either offline or via Internet. You can read more about the project at https://brittasoderbergresearch.wordpress.com, send a PM here on FB if you would like more information and/or would be interested in participating!
Hi! I am a university student who is currently writing a master thesis which aims to understand different societal groups' relationship with mainstream media as well as more alternative media. Right now, I am looking for participants who are interested in the topic of immigration and would consider sharing their thoughts around immigration and media in an online or offline interview. The interviewee's identity will be kept anonymous and the interview takes approximately one hour. Write a comment, e-mail me at britta01.soderberg@student.sh.se or add me on Facebook: Britta Maria Söderberg if you have any questions and/or are interested in participating.

Your participation is appreciated and will hopefully help to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between media and democracy in today's digital society.

Thanks in advance!

Britta Söderberg
Appendix 3 Initial interview questions (sw)

Uppskattningsvis hur mycket tid ägnar du dig åt nyhetskonsumtion dagligen? Vilken typ av medier konsumerar du mest (mainstreammedia, alternativmedia, social media)?


Är nyhetsflödet på din Facebook en neutral representation av verkligheten eller är det anpassat efter dina intressen på något vis?

Vad förknippar du med partiskhet?

Vad förknippar du med objektivitet? Vad känner du till om de pressetiska reglerna?

Känner du hög eller låg tillit till dagens samhället i stort?

Var går gränsen mellan att vara tillitsfull och att vara naiv?

Anser du att Sverige är ett demokratiskt land idag?

Råder yttrandefrihet i Sverige idag?

Finns det något, förutom rapporteringen i invandringsfrågan, som mainstreammedia skulle behöva förändra i din mening?

Deltar du någonsin i politiska debater online? Om ja, hur ofta?
Appendix 4 Initial interview questions (eng translation)

Approximately how much time do you spend on news consumption each day? Which types of media do you consume the most (mainstream media, alternative media, social media)?

What's your view on mainstream media's representation on immigration in general? Do you consider it objective or biased? Please exemplify.

What's your view on alternative media's representation on immigration in general? Do you consider it objective or biased? Please exemplify.

Is the newsfeed on your Facebook a neutral representation of reality or is it adjusted to your interests somehow?

What do you associate with bias?

What do you associate with objectivity?

What do you know about the press ethical rules?

Do you hold a high or low level of trust in society in general?

What's the difference between trust and naivety?

Do you consider Sweden a democratic country?

Does freedom of speech exist in Sweden today?

Are there any topics, other than migration, in which mainstream media need to change their reporting, according to you?

Do you participate in political debates online? If yes, how often?

(My translation)