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# Neo-Nazi Heteroactivism and the Swedish Nationalist Contradiction

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### Article abstract

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# Neo-Nazi Heteroactivism and the Swedish Nationalist Contradiction

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## Abstract

This article is about one of the most violent and visible form anti-LGBTQI activism in Sweden, conducted by Neo-Nazis. Through a critical discourse analysis of 189 texts published in Swedish newspapers and Neo-Nazi alternative media, it argues that contemporary Swedish Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism draws upon and constructs transnational heteroactivist discourses. They claim to “protect the nuclear family” to deflate accusations of homophobia while gaining substantial visibility through news media covering their actions. The findings demonstrate the three ways Neo-Nazi texts use heteroactivist strategies. First, the texts argue that LGBTQI rights and feminism are societally harmful. Second, through intertextuality they refer to both local and international alternative media as the basis for their arguments. Third, they rationalise homophobic hatred. This paper contributes to discussions of heteroactivism, revealing the need to grapple with the ways it is intertwined with race and nationalism. Empirically, the analysis also highlights the significance of anti-LGBTQI activism in contemporary white power and extreme-right movements. The inclusion of news media texts that frame and represent heteroactivist strategies reveals that, despite their rationalising efforts, Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism is represented as homophobic and hateful in news and debate articles describing them. Additionally, news media representations of Neo-Nazi

heteroactivist discourse present a nationalist contradiction, with authors re-constructing narratives of Sweden as a “LGBT friendly nation”, bringing to light complex relations between heteroactivism, homophobia, racism, and nationalism.

### Keywords

Heteroactivism, homophobia, nationalism, homonationalism, Neo-Nazism, Sweden

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## Introduction

“Our freedom is under attack – help us!” (Hedlund et al. 2017) is the startling title of a debate article published across the Swedish media landscape in 2017. Signed by 15 Swedish pride festival organisers, LGBTQI-rights advocates, activists and politicians, the text was written in response to counterdemonstrations, threats, and assaults at pride festivals across Sweden that year. These hostile anti-LGBTQI actions came from people calling themselves “white nationalists” or “national socialists”, para-military nationalist activists who use violence and threats of violence as means in their struggle for “a white nation” (Teitelbaum 2017, 5). They intersect ideologically and strategically with other radical nationalist or populist movements both in Sweden and globally but are distinguished mainly by their non-parliamentary tactics and their comparatively small numbers, with members elected with high demands of devotion (Bjørge and Ravndal 2020). In everyday terms, these groups are simply described as Neo-Nazis or sometimes just Nazis. Politically and ideologically, they are primarily antisemitic, mimicking German Nazism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wilhelmsen 2021). However, their politics are also gendered. In their view women symbolise the boundaries of ethnicity and an ethnic resource. A stance most noticeable in the Swedish Neo-Nazis’ definition of women as the embodiment of the nation and “protectors of the bloodline” along with the assumption that they “belong to” white men as part of a naturalised heterosexual family unit. In these units, women and men have pre-defined roles, including the role of women bringing forth children (Askanius 2022).

As noted in the debate article from 2017, the gender and sexual politics of Neo-Nazis also reify the necessity of binary gender categories and heterosexuality. The anti-LGBTQI elements in Swedish Neo-Nazi activism have been previously mentioned and identified as an important research subject (Björklund and Dahl 2019). This article, therefore, contributes to knowledge of anti-LGBTQI activism in Sweden by providing examples from Neo-Nazi discursive strategies. It also situates these examples in the context of homonationalist imaginaries of a “LGBT friendly” Sweden. This way, it explores the potential contrasts and alignments of Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism with heteroactivism, as well as the contestation of gender and sexual rights in “LGBT friendly” nations (Browne and Nash 2020a). This article first describes concrete conflicts involving Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism. It then contextualises these conflicts within scholarship on heteroactivism and nationalism. A discussion of the research methodology, sampling strategies and the article’s use of critical discourse analysis follows. Finally, the empirical analysis is divided into three sections, two on

the content of Neo-Nazi discourse and the third on news media representation of Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activity.

### **Recent Anti-LGBTQI-Activism in Swedish Neo-Nazi Movements**

Since 2015 two groups have become known for counter demonstrations at LGBTQI events and festivals in Sweden. The now dispersed “Nordic Youth” movement (“Nordisk Ungdom” in Swedish) (Dalsbro 2019) held counterdemonstrations at Stockholm Pride in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. The “Nordic Resistance Movement”, or “NRM” (“Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen” or “NMR” in Swedish), held counter-protests at smaller, local pride parades in Sweden (Vaccari and Sköld Lindell 2016; SVT Nyheter 2017), and threatened LGBTQI-organisations by posting hostile messages on the doors of their premises. Additionally, group members have physically assaulted people (Kasurinen 2020). They have also spread anti-LGBTQI messages in public spaces with stickers and banners displaying barred rainbow patterns and texts such as “Protect the Nuclear Family” and “Crush the Homo Lobby” (Sundelin 2017) in addition to stealing and vandalising pride flags (Laskar et al. 2016).

These anti-LGBTQI actions may seem new due to their seemingly increased visibility, but their ideological and historical basis is not. Persecution of homosexuals and queers was part of Nazism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Plant 1988) and has for a longer time been central in Swedish white power movements, who draw inspiration from Third Reich iconography (Löow 2016). In practice, Neo-Nazis have targeted LGBTQI people through threats, assaults and even murders since the 1980s (Expo 2003 [1997]). The leader of NRM received a prison sentence in 2007 after threats and assaults on members of an LGBTQI organisation (Fagerholm 2007).

The specific contents of Neo-Nazi ideology and practice are, however, in flux since they re-phrase their speech according to contemporary societal norms to decrease “immediate public condemnation” (Kølvraa 2019, 272). According to Löow (2015, 131), antisemitism was articulated in coded terms in Neo-Nazi contexts during the years following the Second World War, which enabled evasion of legal charges for hate speech. Löow argues that Neo-Nazi organisations have a history of code-switching, adapting to norms in society at large and the discourses of other actors. Additionally, an analysis of NRM’s internal, written communication suggests that they also negotiate when to use violence to manoeuvre around legal frameworks and public opinion (Bjørge and Ravndal 2020). Consequently, Neo-Nazi ideology and action cannot be assumed to be independent of the context in which they appear, as the specific content is likely to be informed by, and adjusted to, its expected reception. The same understanding must be applied to their anti-LGBTQI activism. It might be thought of as irrational, spontaneous, timeless and aspatial (thus universal and abstract) homophobia, but it should instead be thoroughly conceptualised with attention to its geographical and historical context. One way to expand on this option is to examine Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism in relation to heteroactivism.

### **Heteroactivism, Nationalism and Race**

The anti-LGBTQI activism covered in this article is contextually specific to the Swedish extreme right, but the ideologies and practices discussed also align with other local, global, and transnational contestations of sexual and gender rights. Browne and Nash (2020a, 73) have introduced the concept of heteroactivism to theorise the forms such resistance can take:

Heteroactivism names the ways that sexual and gender rights are contested within and beyond “liberal democracies” and “LGBT friendly” nations. Heteroactivism then names the new oppositional, ideological and practical response to sexual and gender equalities that are rooted in the belief in the centrality of heteronormativity found in the confluence of gendered, classed, and racialised norms within man/woman divides that come together in normative heterosexual relationships as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society.

Three differences between homophobia and heteroactivism are relevant here. First, heteroactivism builds on *positive* arguments: it is not hatred of the homosexual but love for the heteronormative way of life that is emphasised, which differs from homophobia’s *negative* disdain for queerness. Second, such discourse takes place where overt, hateful expressions of homophobia may be stigmatised and legislated against in discrimination and hate crime laws. Since hateful vilification of LGBTQI people does not attain legitimacy in “LGBT friendly” nations, heteroactivist ideologies adapt to avoid the label “homophobic” (Browne and Nash 2017; 2020a; Nash et al. 2021). This element is shared with antisemitic discourses that also change in form and shape over time and place (Wodak 2018). The common trait of the different but here intersecting hostilities leads to the third difference. Heteroactivism is not always simply a goal in and of itself. It can “often deploy certain sexual and gendered ideologies in the service of advancing intertwined claims about white supremacy, fascism, nationalism and populism” (Browne and Nash 2017, 645).

Intertwined nationalism and heteroactivism have previously been examined through the role of Irishness in campaigns against same-sex marriage (Browne et al. 2018) and abortion (Browne and Nash 2020b) in Ireland, focusing on heteroactivism and nationalism as mutually constitutive. In their analysis of Irish anti-abortion campaigning, Browne and Nash (2020b) argue that its messages invoke an England/Ireland distinction to reproduce imaginations of Ireland as a nation in which abortions do not traditionally exist but risk being imposed from England. Nationalism is utilised for a heteroactivist agenda against abortion or same-sex marriage, while the heteroactivism itself simultaneously reproduces narratives about the two nations, both one’s own nation and the other nation, which is seen as a threat. The examples highlight how heteroactivism is not only about gender and sexuality politics, but also about nationalism and territorial politics. Hence, there is a need to look beyond the contexts of the UK, Ireland, Canada and Australia, where the heteroactivist concept has hitherto been applied (Browne et al. 2018; Nash and Browne 2021; Nash et al. 2021), for a broader understanding of heteronormativity and nationalism.

The nation that NRM seeks not so much to protect as to *establish* is a future, racially unitary, white pan-Nordic nation needing to be rebuilt after a revolution. This future nation

consists of a territorial area to be cherished and protected from people they define as “enemies”. NRM’s list of enemies and “traitors to the nation” (“*folkförrädare*” in Swedish) is quite extensive but can be summarised as representatives or followers of Judaism, immigration, feminism, communism, LGBTQI movements, and multiculturalism (Westberg 2021, 217; Expo 2022). In the movement’s ideology these “enemies” are all connected to an antisemitic core. Their inspiration from, and connection to, historic national socialism builds on a conspiracy theory in which Jews are the main “enemy” and other “traitors” are thought of as being manipulated in their interests (Löow 2019). Focusing here on one segment of the list of “traitors” (LGBTQI movements), NRM displays an obsession with heterosexuality and a stable, essential construction of gender, one in which white women have an obligation to “secure the future of white babies” (NRM slogan quoted in Askanius 2022, 1764). They share this banally explicit norm reinforcement with larger (more influential) contemporary European radical nationalist movements, who praise “the heteronormative family with an aura of counterrevolution aiming at reoccupying lost territory” (Dietze and Roth 2020, 13). Heteronormativity is therefore ideologically central, with women instrumental to the nation as either symbolic mothers or actual mothers, and men supposed to be the “defenders” of both. LGBTQI people and movements constitute, on the other side, enemies to this “natural order”.

In contrast to the Neo-Nazi nationalist “utopia” (or dystopia!) lies the already existing Swedish nation with its own narratives of greatness. Mainstream Swedish nationalism relies on exceptionalism, according to which the nation is exceptionally moral and thus superior to other nations (Jansson 2018). The morally exceptional Swedish nation virtues inclusion of all minorities hated by NRM. We see here a nationalist contradiction through plural, contrasting nationalisms (Simonsen and Koefoed 2020) or an instance of “Nationalism vs. Nationalism” (Hellström et al. 2012). Neo-Nazis and other radical right actors are labelled as nationalists (by themselves and others), while breaking with a more subtle but pervasive set of nationalist hegemonic discourses. There are multiple constructions of Sweden as exceptionally inclusive: anti-racist (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Schierup and Ålund 2011; Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019), gender-equal (Martinsson et al. 2016), and LGBTQI inclusive (Kehl 2018; Strand and Kehl 2019). The last examples represent studies of homonationalism, i.e., the discursive construction of a nation as exceptionally sexually liberal or free, often through portraying immigrant and Muslim ‘homophobic Others’ as its external threats (Puar 2017). Both homophobia and LGBTQI inclusion can thus be productive for nationalist imaginaries, but in contradicting ways. The NRM’s hateful nationalism with its roots in antisemitic national socialism defines heterosexuality as vital for the reproduction of the nation. The “LGBT friendly” homonationalism relies instead on imagining homophobia as constituted only outside of the nation or in people who are from outside of it, particularly the Global South (Puar 2013; 2017). Although in contrast to each other, both ideologies are thus based on racial and ethnic exclusion, albeit in different forms.

This article contributes to the literature on heteroactivism, with a focus on the entwinement of race in nationalist and heteroactivist discourse, or how “race plays a

productive role" (Boulila 2019, 104) in heteroactivism. Given the centrality of LGBTQI lives and rights in both the hatred of Neo-Nazi nationalism and the protective claims of homonationalism, the framework of heteroactivism enables an understanding of the ways contemporary anti-LGBTQI activism is used to shape nationalist formations, both "extreme" (Neo-Nazi) and "liberal" (homonationalist) variants. Acknowledging the ways Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism does or does not align with the concept of heteroactivism broadens our knowledge of the conflicting nationalist formations while also providing a much-needed theorisation of the role of race in heteroactivism- and the role of heteroactivism in racism. The analysis that follows discusses three key relevant topics: i) NRM's activism as heteroactivism; ii) its entwinement with constructions of race and nation; and iii) the nationalist contradictions brought forth in reactions to NRM's anti-LGBTQI activism.

### Contextualising Texts: Studying NRM's anti-LGBTQI Activism through Critical Discourse Analysis

The study consists of a critical discourse analysis of 189 media texts representing NRM's anti-LGBTQI position originating from two different sources: media texts published on NRM's Swedish website and news media articles from local and national news press. The NRM website articles were collected through a search for NRM's frequently used terms, namely, *homolobbyn* (the homo lobby), *HBT\** (Swedish acronym for LGBT\*), and *kulturmarxism* (cultural Marxism). Additional texts were found by following links to connected articles on the website. To find articles in Swedish newspapers, a media search was conducted via the digital media archive *Retriever.se* using the keywords *Nazi\**, *NMR*, and *Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen*, which were combined with keywords describing LGBTQI events and spaces, namely, *HBT\**, *Pride* and *regnbåg\** (rainbow\*). The texts selected from both sources were all published between 2016 and 2019, a period with many public events and extensive media coverage of NRM activism in Sweden (Holt 2020). All texts were published in Swedish and quotes from them used in the analysis have been translated into English by the author. The references made to Neo-Nazi texts in the article have consciously not disclosed authors' names or provided links to the (still active) webpage, in order to avoid further spreading its Neo-Nazi content.

A critical discourse approach was used to select and interpret the texts, informed by Fairclough's (2003; 2009) emphasis on semiotic elements (here media texts) being related to other social elements, such as other discourses, social structures, or events. The NRM texts are not independent from their other activities, including violence, electoral politics, in-group activities, etc. The texts also relate to the wider structures of nationalism and nationalism's discursive formations outside of the movement, described in the previous section. Simply put, NRM's texts ought to be analysed not solely on the basis of their linguistic, symbolic content but also through their semiotic and social relation to their social and discursive context (Fairclough 1992; 2003).

To study both the content and relational character of NRM anti-LGBTQI discourse expressed online, the chosen NRM texts were divided into three categories: ideological

essays, news commentary, and activist reports narrating member activities. The categories refer to a text's content and style, based on its most prominent topics and characteristics. After the NRM texts were read and sorted into these categories (see Table 1 for a summary), they were searched for semiotic and linguistic elements, inspired by analytical categories from critical discourse analysis. Most important were intertextuality (the inclusion or exclusion of other voices in the text), assumptions (of reality, of possible reality or future, of what is good or what reality ought to be), and strategies of legitimisation (Fairclough 2003, 41-44, 55, 98-99).

**Table 1.** NRM media articles by type of text.

Type of text	Essays	International News Commentary	Swedish News Commentary	Activist Reports	Total
Quantity	9	10	22	23	64

The intertextual analysis (of implicit or explicit text references in the NRM texts), was extended through the analysis of news media texts (summarised in Table 2), to comprehend anti-LGBTQI activism in relation to the Swedish homonationalist discourse. The approach here was different. The aim was to see how Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activities and discourse were represented and narrated to a wider audience of news readers. Lastly, to explain how Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism affects nationalist formations, an analysis was undertaken of NRM's anti-LGBTQI discourse and the news media's representations of NRM's anti-LGBTQI actions. The National newspapers included were *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD), *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *ETC* and *QX*, the last calling itself "Sweden's rainbow media". It is not entirely accurate to define them as national since they are mainly based in Stockholm. They do, however, reach readers beyond the capital and have larger numbers of readers than local news. The political orientation of debate articles is foremost based on party membership expressed by the authors. When no such definition exists, the explicit ideological direction of the newspaper decides the political context. Swedish newspapers transparently describe their ideological connections, and it is those descriptions the political labels are based on, unless other political allegiance was evident.

### **Homophobia or Heteroactivism?**

NRM's media texts, especially the "News Commentaries", are written in the style of news reports and copy the style of news or debate articles by commenting on events, using preambles and a news-like writing tone, and citing and linking to sources. The texts are, however, not trying to be considered legitimate news articles but are instead part of the cluster of Swedish websites defined as "alternative news media" (Askanius 2017, 342) or "right-wing alternative media" (Holt 2020, 12). These texts are differentiated from regular news media by



**Table 2.** News and debate articles sorted by political orientation and type of newspaper.

Type of text	Political orientation of author or newspaper	Place of publication		Total
		Local Newspaper	National Newspaper	
News articles	Leftist	7	12	19
	Social Democratic	12	3	15
	Liberal	11	7	18
	Conservative	9	0	9
	Independent & Public Service	18	4	22
	LGBTQ-oriented	0	5	5
Debate articles	Leftist	2	1	3
	Social Democratic	5	5	10
	Liberal	6	0	6
	Conservative	5	1	6
	NGO's	1	2	3
	LGBTQ-NGO's	0	7	7
	Unknown	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>77</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>125</b>

reacting to professional or mainstream journalism and by their ideologically strong commitments to racism, anti-immigration, xenophobia, and radical nationalism. In many cases, and in the case of NRM's webpages, alternative news media also cover a broader range of topics such as gender and sexuality. Within the broader spectrum of the far right, the website analysed here is considered extreme. It is so radical, in fact, that other far-right, alternative media producers distance themselves from it because of its explicit Nazi sympathies (Holt 2020).

The NRM website is thus considered an extremist right-wing alternative media, on the fringes of alternative right-wing news media production. Nonetheless, while the posts are

considered extremist, NRM's media posts constitute only *part* of the various propaganda, communication, and network strategies they use. Compared to offline activism and other internal communication channels, the website articles are also likely to present a "cleaner", more presentable Nazism (Blee 2007; Askanius 2019). The texts are thus both more hateful in tone than other alternative media sites, and less hateful than internal communication among NRM members hidden from view. Moreover, the online postings are not considered the most important activism by NRM members themselves:

Activism equals violence in the world of NRM whose members define it first and foremost as a combat group, with its primary battle is to be won in the streets and not necessarily or exclusively online by changing hearts and minds through the power of language and discourse (Askanius 2022, 1769).

The emphasis on street activism does not mean that NRM's production of alternative news is insignificant; it is, however, part of a wider political project and set of strategies. The intertwinement of activism in physical spaces and online is noticeable in the three genres of anti-LGBTQI texts: reporting of real-space activism by organisation members, news commentaries, and commentary on events in various essays.

In all three genres NRM's anti-LGBTQI activism is mainly reactive to LGBTQI and queer activities, posting commentaries, for example, on Stockholm Pride. This reactive quality holds true not only for the texts but also for their activism in the public sphere, where they have reacted disruptively towards LGBTQI affirmative activities by stealing rainbow flags and counter protesting pride marches (NRM 2016a; 2016b). In one of the articles, written in 2013 but re-published as the response to Stockholm Pride 2016, the reactive stance is clear, as the writer wishes to "expose" LGBTQI activists:

It is also necessary that all "f\*\*\*t haters" [citation marks in original, censorship by author] reflect upon their standpoints which often can be more or less thought through – if one has an interest in seeing a change of the situation. Ask the question of what it is that creates anger or loathing and what risks come from the current LGBTQ movement. If you cannot describe problems or risks and put the question in a context, then you will be run over by those fond of homos. It is not constructive to live up to their stereotypes. A thought-through standpoint that is articulated honestly with confidence can, on the other hand, become very uncomfortable and cause real harm to the LGBTQ movement and the cultural bolshevism that is its underlying essence. Should it be reasonable that children's books be rewritten as propaganda for homosexuality, should students be indoctrinated in the schools and should subjects such as queer theory and gender studies be financed at the universities? The more questions asked, the stronger the insight becomes about the situation having become absurd, to put it mildly. The homo movement must be exposed and when this happens understanding increases of what happens in the world, what has happened in

history and what can be prevented from happening in the future (NRM2016c [2013]).

The Neo-Nazi can, according to the quote's author, strategically no longer be simply hateful for the sake of hate but must translate the expression into more acceptable forms. The writer does not condone homophobic hatred; in fact, the writer encourages it and assumes the reader holds homophobic views and feelings. However, the writer suggests expressing them in "rational" ways, to strategically gain support and more effectively cause harm to LGBTQI activism and acceptance. The post thus shows an awareness of a sexual and gendered landscape in which hatred in a non-rationalised form is not enough, requiring a shift in focus (Browne et al. 2018, 533). It encourages a move away from expressions of direct (but assumedly legitimate) anger and disgust, and towards arguments justifying the evident negative effects. The code-switching from hateful to "rational" follows previously found patterns (see Loew 2015; Bjørgo and Ravndal 2020), suggesting that Neo-Nazis' sentiment, affects and ideology do not change but their strategies do. The NRM activists are thus heteroactivists in the sense that they adjust their anti-LGBTQI statements to a public view (and legal system) less forgiving towards homophobia, but their resentment of LGBTQI people remains.

The legitimising strategy of rationalisation in NRM's hostility towards LGBTQI subjects is seldom as explicit as its response to Stockholm Pride in 2013 and 2016. Many other texts reacting to LGBTQI rights and lives align with its recommendation of providing "evidence" for the "ills" of LGBTQI people. Some posts contain links to international media, such as British, US and Canadian YouTube videos and websites (NRM 2017a; 2018a; 2018b). Others refer to Swedish news pages and magazines (NRM 2019a) or LGBTQI events noticed in public spaces, referred to with images of advertising posters, rainbow-painted buildings, and pride parades. Overall, the posts express reactive and reactionary elements of NRM, responding to visible manifestations of LGBTQI people or symbols with either scorn, mockery, or documentation of their own group members' vandalism.

The international references in news commentary are often conspiracy theories represented as truthful, described as "objective" or "exposing hidden facts" to deflate readings of the texts as hateful (NRM 2017b). The several markers of "objectivity" refer to sources as scientific and trustworthy (which they are not). Still, credibility is claimed through words such as "science" and "scientists". An example is found in a post's title which reads: "Scientists: 'Homosexuality and deviating sex identity, not congenital characteristics'" (NRM 2016d). More than suggesting truthfulness, claims are also used to free the author of accountability:

Observe that the following text reflects different studies and assessments with related source references. [NRM media channel] does not make any judgments about the results and is not publishing these to agitate or violate any community but out of pure common interest for research on this topic. If you know that you

are easily offended and may take offence by this, you are encouraged to stop reading now (NRM 2019b).

The author shows an awareness of the content being offensive but uses claims to factuality as a shield for accusations of hatred. What might be lost in translation is that the words “agitate or violate any community” refers to the Swedish law against hate speech, *agitation against ethnic group* (hets mot folkgrupp), which covers offensive statements against racial, ethnic, religious, sexual and gendered minorities. The disregard for the post’s offence is thus not only adjusted for readers’ emotional reactions, but is a literal statement of claiming a legal right to publish the text. Factuality claims reveal that in heteroactivism NRM express aversion toward LGBTQI people by adjusting for the “LGBT friendly” context, coding their statements to avoid legal consequences, while simultaneously presenting homophobia as “rational” rather than only hateful.

While a heteroactivist influence is clear in the adaptation to the law, there is another reason for NRM’s posts being seen as heteroactivist, namely the recurring focus on “protecting the children” or “the family”, believing in heteronormativity as a societal good. However, they do not refrain from vilification of LGBTQI people in their call for protection. They frequently use the homophobic trope of “gay men as paedophiles”, representing them as a threat to children’s physical safety and wellbeing by repeatedly stating that the “homo lobby” attempts to normalise paedophilia, putting children at risk (examples occur in NRM 2017c; 2018c; 2019c). Neo-Nazi homophobia thus turns into heteroactivism in one sense, as they react and adapt to sexual and gender rights as threatening children (of the nation). Still, they remain blatantly homophobic in their wish to “[c]rush the homolobby” (Sundelin 2017), with rationalisations and calls to protect the children as justifications not for the good of the nuclear family but arising from the ills of LGBTQI people. Their actions should therefore be interpreted as both heteroactivist *and* homophobic, since the heteroactivist strategies occur as adaptations to expected reactions and legal boundaries, while the homophobic hatred remains, despite rather shallow attempts to mask it behind heteroactivist discourses.

### **Sexuality, Race and Nation: New Temporal-geographic Context, Old Racist Strategy**

The main platform of NRM activists is still their antisemitism, racism, and nationalist aim to create a “Nordic Nation” (Teitelbaum 2017; Ravndal 2018), which makes their use of heteroactivism a part of their white power activism. These principles are also evident in some of their propaganda rationalising homophobia, such as the quote above (2013/2016) arguing that the LGBTQI movement has an “underlying essence of cultural bolshevism”. This reference is to a Nazi conspiracy theory, according to which the world is supposedly “controlled by Jews”, who they say have power over “cultural Bolsheviks” (mentioned 10 times in the material) or “cultural Marxists” (mentioned 28 times), who in turn “steer LGBTQI activism”. In short, the main threat supposedly posed by “cultural Marxism” lies in racial and ethnic minorities, women and LGBTQI people who, by demanding equality, “disrupt” an assumed national order and unity (Jamin 2018). In one of NRM’s essayistic posts from 2016, Stockholm Pride is labelled as an “attack on the Swedish people”, which according to the author “aims

to question sex roles, social norms and all other supporting structures in a sound society" (NRM, 2016e). "The Swedish people" are all assumed to be white and threatened by pride events that are self-evidently (no arguments provided) dangerous to Swedes and to a "sound society".

By presenting LGBTQI people, especially activists, as their "enemies", NRM connects them to the vast array of people they deem unfit for their white heterosexual nation. According to Lööw (2016, 333), "homophobia is central in the [race ideological] imagination of 'moral enemies'. Homosexuals are considered 'deficient' and 'racially perverted'. Homosexuality is also seen as 'a Jewish invention' – with the purpose to 'exterminate the white race'". In her study of Swedish white power activity in Sweden, Lööw reveals homophobia's historically central role in the activist milieu to which NRM belong, which is connected to their belief in and struggle for white superiority. She also provides examples of how Neo-Nazi framings of homosexuality were articulated in the 1980s and 90s. In her selection of quotes from white power magazines (the right-wing alternative media of its time), two themes reoccur frequently: AIDS and the increased visibility of homosexuality in public spheres. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a white power paper called "Nordisk Kamp" (Nordic Struggle): "all this legal defending and privileging of homosex filth which the Swedish people are forced to accept and come to terms with, while homosexuality provably spreads the horrendous aids-plague [...]" (Lööw 2016, 334). Much like the quotes found in NRM's posts, Neo-Nazi ideology has historically found other contextually informed rationalisations for homophobia. In the example from Nordisk Kamp the "problem" was that Swedes were "forced to accept homosexuality", with an historical event, namely the spread of AIDS, being the rationale for such acceptance being damaging.

In NRM's media discourse the perceived "problem" of increased LGBTQI acceptance and visibility remains, while the legitimisation strategies centre on new themes informed by events Neo-Nazis can object to, protest and ridicule, such as more and larger Pride events, or less heteronormative school curricula. The contextual frames affecting legitimisation strategies thus change, from the AIDS crisis to the increased access to false "facts" spread online. Through these "facts" NRM construct heteroactivist strategies, such as claiming to be "rational" rather than "hateful" and presenting LGBTQI activism as harmful towards heteronormativity, which is considered as foundational to (white) society. However, the novelty of such legitimisation strategies should not be overestimated. Neo-Nazi movements in Sweden have a long history of anti-LGBTQI discourse and violence, while arguing that their hostility is in line with what is "best for society". Heteroactivist discourse is therefore only one form among the many expressions of homo- and transphobia coming from Neo-Nazi groups.

### **NRM's Heteroactivism and Swedish Homonationalism**

The marginal position of NRM's website in the media landscape suggests that the site's impact on society is not merely through direct ideological influence but also through the attention it gets in regular media. According to Holt (2020, 52), the website was mentioned over 4,000 times in press, TV, and radio over a three-year period (2017-2019), while the

movement itself was mentioned over 33,000 times. As alternative media texts, NRM's posts react to and recontextualise mainstream news, while also being reacted to and represented in the mainstream news. Other than direct citation and mention in news media, there are also signs of far-right discourse that used to be seen as too extreme for mainstream media becoming increasingly normalised. As a result, even if some publications are considered extremist, arguments and elements from them affect mainstream discourse (Titley 2019; Krzyżanowski et al. 2021). The role of newspapers' contextualisation of far-right action and discourse thus brings forth the need to study NRM's anti-LGBTQI discourse not only in and of itself, but also for the way it is recontextualised in mainstream news media.

In written reactions and comments published in Swedish newspapers, the actions of NRM are confirmed to be homophobic, violent, and connected to hate crime (exemplified in De Vivo 2017; Franchell 2017; Nilsson 2019). A researcher interviewed in one of the local newspapers stated that "these groups possess such a fright capital that it is enough with them attending for it to be unsafe and for people being scared" (Sunnemark 2018). NRM's political message is therefore not reducible to their written material as the group, in Judith Butler's terms, "is already speaking before it utters any words" (2015, 156). In published reactions and comments there is an unspoken agreement that NRM's anti-LGBTQI activism is homophobic. The heteroactivist arguments thus do not have as great an impact as the presence of NRM in physical spaces where they constitute a potential and actual physical threat towards people. Still, "freedom of speech" grants them permission to express themselves in public arenas (Lindeberg 2018). This acceptance may remain even when their actions are represented as hateful and hindering LGBTQI people from partaking in pride events:

Nazis are frightening and they are visible. Their banners and presence are scary enough for many to avoid participation [at Pride] and instead go back into the closets. But as long as they are just standing there and not breaking any laws it is their democratic right. "... The Nazi homo-hatred is easy to condemn and to gather around. But the threat and hatred towards LGBTQ people in the world come, to the same degree, from religious fundamentalists. Even here the public Sweden needs to stand united behind us (Hedlund et al. 2017).

The authors confirm that NRM's anti-LGBTQI activism is performed through taking up public space and restricting LGBTQI visibility by inflicting fear of harm. In the quote, they claim to speak in the interests of LGBTQI people, and partly accept NRM's anti-LGBTQI protests through indirect reference to "free speech" (comparable to the case in Nash et al. 2021). Free speech here is the free expression of anti-LGBTQI sentiment not only in public space but in reaction to pride parades, as the reference to NRM "just standing there" shows. Furthermore, the concrete actions of NRM's anti-LGBTQI activism in public space have been transferred to other actors and political issues beyond those involved in the attacks and protests. It is common in news media texts to define NRM as a "threat towards democracy" (examples occur in Badeli et al. 2017; Dau 2017; Tardell and Grip 2018) instead of a threat to the people they attack. In doing so, representations of NRM's anti-LGBTQI activist discourse have Neo-

Nazism defined as an anti-democratic force that is “let into the democratic spaces to demolish the democracy and rights we know of today” (Adolfsson and Liljegren 2019).

NRM’s actions are perceived in news media as damaging not only “democratic spaces” but, with respect to the “LGBT-friendliness” of Sweden, also the nation. There are signs of “Swedishness” appearing in reactions to, and narrations of, Neo-Nazi nationalist anti-LGBTQI actions. Debate articles signed by liberal or conservative politicians and sources seem particularly prone to emphasise that NRM constitute a threat to Sweden because of their homophobia. Accordingly, not only LGBTQI rights, but the nation providing them too, are under threat (Angermayr and Jansson 2017; Hedlund et al. 2017; Saweståhl et al. 2018; Borås tidning 2019). The “we” who are under attack is thus not only LGBTQI people but also the Swedish national order or the abstract national pride connected to Sweden as a morally exceptional nation. A conservative debate article situates Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI activism in the context of general homophobia in Sweden:

Pride flags are stolen and burned in place after place across the country. Extremists from both the right and the left push hard propaganda against LGBTQ persons and the homo lobby they think exists. In some suburbs and housing areas where social exclusion grows, homo- and transphobia is highly noticeable. LGBTQ persons move when cars are vandalised, windows are broken, and they are harassed on the streets. Young boys and girls fall victim to honour oppression, assaults and violence because of their sexuality or gender identity. This goes on in Sweden today and it is completely unacceptable. (Saweståhl et al. 2018).

There are overt nationalist elements, such as referring to events in “the country” and “Sweden today”, but there are also subtle suggestions that leftists and immigrants or immigrant descendants constitute the most pressing danger. The authors conflate NRM’s anti-LGBTQI activism (stealing pride flags) with leftist activism, and small-town and suburban populations, projecting homophobic action onto radicals (including left-wing extremists) and racialised minorities (suburban populations that experience social exclusion). While the text does not state that immigrants are the assumed perpetrators, they suggest it through references to honour violence and car vandalism in suburbs populated by migrants and racialised citizens. Such representation follows the patterns of spatial stigmatisation, in which race and class are intertwined in negative representations of suburban areas (Backvall 2019). The debate article begins by describing NRM’s concrete flag burnings but ends with discussing city suburbs and honour killings (see also Mårtensson 2017; Davidsohn and Stafilidis 2018; Madon 2018). The actual homophobic and heteroactivist events are not dealt with but come to represent entirely different places and people unrelated to Neo-Nazis. These leaps miss the particularities of Neo-Nazi heteroactivism and allow the authors to conflate them with any homophobic action that comes to mind, often vague ones, which are described without any supporting examples.

The mention of suburbs reflects the segregation in Swedish metropolitan areas, where income levels and ethnicity are related (see Grundström and Molina 2016; Malmberg et al. 2018). By referring to the suburban space inhabited by larger percentages of ethnic minorities and people of lower income, homophobia is attached to its population, racialising homophobic “others” who threaten LGBTQI people (Bracke 2012; Haritaworn 2012; Boulila 2019, 114). These examples represent the crudest way of describing NRM’s anti-LGBTQI activism as attacks on the Swedish nation, with NRM’s actions transferred onto left-wing activists and immigrant populations, who are in reality more likely to be victims of Neo-Nazi violence due to political engagement, race, or ethnicity. Despite this vulnerability, they are described side by side with NRM, implying they are (also) a threat to the Swedish democratic nation.

The actions of NRM may then be followed by observers’ narratives of competing nationalist imaginaries of a Sweden without homophobia, even while serving as examples of the very same. The narrative of a progressive Sweden is kept intact by affirming nation-states as entities which are either “‘gay-friendly’ or ‘homophobic’” (Puar 2013, 337, citation marks in original), with Sweden assumed to be the former. Osei-Kofi and colleagues (2018, 146) suggest that mass media readings of Neo-Nazi gestures and their reactions have reproduced racism as traceable to extremist individuals and “solidified a hegemonic image of what racism looks like in Sweden” (see also Pred 2000). The same could be true for homophobia, as NRM’s anti-LGBTQI activism becomes represented in media texts as a clear and easily identifiable case of what homophobia looks like. At the same time, NRM’s actions are also potentially decontextualised and come to represent abstract homophobia that has no connections to Neo-Nazism.

### **Conclusion: Heteroactivist Shells, Homophobic Cores and Nationalist Surroundings**

The concept of heteroactivism has provided a timely contribution to research and analyses of contemporary resistance to LGBTQI rights. This article identifies some of its possibilities and limits for understanding contemporary nationalism, racism and anti-LGBTQI politics in Northern Europe. A critical discourse analysis of Neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQI texts in Sweden has identified heteroactivist strategies being used in Neo-Nazi homophobic activism, thus indicating discursive overlaps between extreme far-right groups and other, more moderate heteroactivists. The online postings of NRM contain writings about gender, sexuality and LGBTQI rights, topics associated with heteroactivism, as the authors use heteroactivist strategies. These include claiming to be protective rather than destructive, claiming “free speech” rights and framing their views as “rational” or “factual”. In one post, a group member explicitly facilitates other members “rationalising” their homophobic views by providing arguments for them, thereby using heteroactivist discourse as a shell for a homophobic core. That shell also serves to deflect accusations of hate crimes; NRM texts argue that if a statement is “factual” it cannot be hateful. Thus, NRM use heteroactivist strategies, but remain homophobic in their aims, visions, and actions, which have a longer history within Neo-Nazism in Sweden. The traces of heteroactivism are thus seemingly instrumental rather than



foundational. These results point to the conceptual and geographical bounds of defining acts as heteroactivism instead of (new forms of) homophobia, as I argue they are not always easily separated. People can attempt to pre-empt accusations of bigotry, hate and homophobia (Browne and Nash 2020a), but is it their ambitions or their reception that judges them heteroactivist?

If heteroactivism is strategically used to avoid the label of being “homophobic”, NRM evidently constitutes an example of a failure. The analysis of the representation of the movement’s anti-LGBTQI actions in Swedish news media shows that their heteroactivist shell is weak and the homophobic core easily exposed. Confirmation can be found in news media responses not to NRM’s written words, but to their physical presence in public space and the threat of (homophobic and racist) violence they pose. Interpreting Neo-Nazi messages, devoid of context, as heteroactivist would be undercut by the lack of legitimacy their messages receive when their actions are commented upon. This study shows how journalists, politicians and activists clearly frame a Neo-Nazi movement using heteroactivist strategies as homophobic, regardless of their attempts at “rational” condemnation. In this discrepancy between NRM’s written discourse and the reception of their actions, a place can be found for deeper engagement with nationalisms informing, and being informed by, contemporary anti-LGBTQI activisms, including heteroactivism and homophobia.

Following Browne and Nash (2017), the emerging heteroactivist arguments must be understood if counterstrategies are to be developed. This understanding is facilitated by a deconstruction of the heteroactivist arguments, but also by engaging critically with ongoing reactions and resistance to heteroactivism, especially given the heteroactivism that originates from movements labelled as extremist and a threat not only to LGBTQI people, but democratic society and the national imaginary. In the case of NRM, their heteroactivist strategies and homophobic actions are intertwined with their overarching ethno-nationalist purpose. Researching anti-LGBTQI activism in “LGBT friendly” countries therefore includes investigating the relational character of said activism and its history.

The critical discourse analysis of news and debate articles in this paper has been an attempt to understand the contradictory, but also mutually reinforcing, nationalist processes that continue to place LGBTQI rights as symbols in the centre of nationhood, positioning LGBTQI people as either enemies or victims. Studying how heteroactivist strategies are received, or reacted to, could be extended to include many other voices and experiences, such as those of activists, affected people, communities, and organisations. This is especially important when heteroactivism is, by definition, adjusted to the surrounding ideas, norms, and legal frameworks of assumedly LGBT friendly nations. Studying the receptions and responses to heteroactivism, we may find reproductions of homonationalism; however, these responses should remind us that just because someone asserts that they are *for* heterosexuality, rather than *against* LGBTQI people, they do not need to be believed.

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