



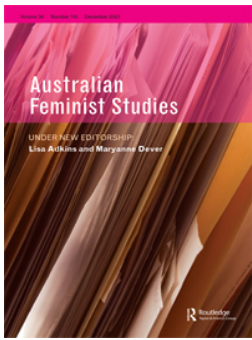
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Dead White men vs. Greta Thunberg: Nationalism, Misogyny, and Climate Change Denial in Swedish far-right Digital Media

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## ABSTRACT

In the autumn of 2018 Greta Thunberg started her school strike. Soon she and the Fridays For Future-movement rose to world-fame, stirring a backlash laying bare the intrinsic climate change denial of Swedish far-right digital media. These outlets had previously been almost silent on climate change, but in 2019, four of the ten most read articles on the site *Samhällsnytt* were about Thunberg, all of them discrediting the movement and spreading doubt about climate science. Using the conceptualisation of industrial/breadwinner masculinities as developed by Hultman and Pulé [2018. *Ecological Masculinities: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Guidance*. Routledge Studies in Gender and Environments. New York: Routledge], this article analyses what provoked this reaction. It explores how the hostility to Thunberg was constructed in far-right media discourse in the years 2018–2019, when she became a threat to an imagined industrial, homogenic and patriarchal community. Using conspiracy theories and historical tropes of irrational femininity, the far right was trying to protect the usually hidden environmental privileges, related to unequal carbon emissions and resource use, that Thunberg and her movement made visible.

## KEYWORDS

Alternative media; industrial/breadwinner masculinities; environmental privileges; carbon inequality; conspiracy theories; critical discourse analysis

## Introduction

Climate change is affecting all life on earth. In Sweden, most political parties agree that the country, as part of the wealthy, industrialised global north, should be a forerunner in reducing its emissions, but there is a growing opposition to climate change mitigation from far-right nationalism, which has been visible within the main far-right political party the Sweden Democrats. The Swedish far-right media ecosystem hardly wrote about climate change before 2018, but when Greta Thunberg and the climate change justice movement rose to prominence, it became an important issue. By scare-quoting climate, a discourse was created where climate change was perceived as a hoax, and anyone demanding action could be ridiculed (Vowles and Hultman 2021). In 2019, four of the ten most read texts on the site *Samhällsnytt* were about global warming, all of

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them spreading climate change denial in connection to a story about Thunberg. She was titled 'alarmist' and climate change politics were described as an 'irrational' and 'hysterical' reaction to a scientifically non-existing problem. This can help explain why views about climate change in Sweden are, according to recent reports, becoming nearly as divided as in the US (e.g. Newman et al. 2020).

The fossil fuel industry's attempts to disinform the public about climate change, in contradiction to its own scientific research, stretches back to the 1970s and 1980s (Franta 2021). In the early 1990s, it formed a coherent climate change countermovement together with conservative foundations and think tanks, as a reaction to the creation of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and climate scientist James Hansen's testimony to US congress (e.g. Brulle 2014; Dunlap and McCright 2011; Oreskes and Conway 2011; Stoddard et al. 2021). European think tanks have also been active in spreading doubt about climate science (Almiron et al. 2020; Busch and Judick 2021; Ekberg and Pressfeldt *in press*), and several of the arguments have been picked up by far-right parties and politicians (e.g. Forchtner 2019; A. Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). In Sweden, there was a consensus about climate change in legacy media up until a short period, 2008–2010, when reporting on climate change was high following the release of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 and connected to the climate summit in Copenhagen 2009. Then, the group the Climate Realists (formerly the Stockholm Initiative), almost exclusively run by older influential men from industry, media, or academia, made a significant impact in spreading literal denial, i.e. to say that climate change is either not happening or not anthropogenic. At once there was a flurry of interest, where these influential individuals were granted media space for articles and statements, but they were later marginalised (Anshelm and Hultman 2014). During the mid-2010s, however, several far-right digital alternative media sites grew in influence and here denialism became prominent.<sup>1</sup> A separate media ecosystem emerged that justified itself as being in opposition to a perceived corrupted mainstream media echoing the voice of the elites (Holt 2019). The far-right media ecosystem can be characterised by a propaganda feedback loop, where actors police each other regarding ideological content rather than the truthfulness of the news (Benkler, Farris, and Roberts 2018). This means that disinformation can easily spread and be amplified.

Here we study how four far-right digital news sites reported on climate change and reacted to Greta Thunberg during the years 2018–2019. *Fria tider* (Free times), *Samhällsnytt* (Society or Community news), and *Nya tider* (New times) are clearly within the propaganda feedback loop, while *Nyheter idag* (News today) sees itself as self-corrective of legacy media but adheres to some journalistic norms. In regard to journalistic practice, it thus takes up a position between the far-right media ecosystem and legacy, or traditional, media. In 2020 the four sites reached between 6 and 12 per cent of Sweden's online population (Newman et al. 2020).

First, we introduce the conceptualisation of industrial/breadwinner masculinities and research showing how anti-environmentalism and anti-feminism overlap. After presenting the four media sites as well as our methodology, we show how Thunberg is portrayed and constructed as a threat to the imagined Swedish community of the far right. We end with a discussion highlighting a few implications of our findings.

## Threatened Hegemonic Masculinities

Most of the early scholarly work on gender and climate change identified women, especially in the developing world, as being more severely affected (see special issue of *Gender and Development*, edited by Masika [2002]). Structural, gendered, and racial inequalities have made women the most vulnerable, and it is them who get hurt the most in natural disasters. Rising temperatures also make caring and provisional work, where women bear an unequal burden, more difficult (Kinnvall and Rydström 2019).<sup>2</sup> The structural, gendered, and racial injustices of climate change have been highlighted by Greta Thunberg and her fellow school strikers (Thunberg, Neubauer, and Valenzuela 2019).

Following calls from several scholars (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2011; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; MacGregor 2010), more work has been done during the last decade looking at gendered climate politics, and unequal power distributions in the global North (Pulé and Hultman, 2021). Especially, the value-nexus of right-wing conservatism, anti-environmentalism, and anti-feminism in connection to masculinities has been scrutinised (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020; Gaard 2015; MacGregor and Seymour 2017; McCright and Dunlap 2011). Many of the public individuals, most of whom are white and male, who have participated in generating climate controversy, hold strong beliefs in market forces and a mistrust of regulatory government policies (Dunlap and McCright 2011; Oreskes and Conway 2011). The mere suggestion that we live on a finite planet transformed by carbon pollution challenges the primacy of those who benefit the most from industrialisation and fossil fuel extraction (Anshelm and Hultman 2014). This has helped to create the 'alliance of antagonisms' (Kaiser and Puschmann 2017) between climate change denialism and attitudes of anti-feminism and anti-immigration, which has been seen in survey studies (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020; Kränge, Kaltenborn, and Hultman 2021).

In this study we use industrial/breadwinner masculinities as conceptualised by Hultman and Pulé (2018) in analysing the opposition to Thunberg. These typologies represent a 'category of men who have long been (and still are) enmeshed with industrial-scale extractive processes and services reliant on energy-intensive, profit-consolidating, ecologically destructive and fossil fuel dependent processes' (Hultman and Pulé 2018, 42). While industrial/breadwinner has been a hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), Daggett (2018) argues that it now also performs as a reactionary hypermasculinity, as it to a certain degree has lost its hegemonic position.<sup>3</sup> While gender injustices are still prevalent, and the global community has failed to act sufficiently on climate change, feminist and environmental struggle has nonetheless made some progress. This can be seen in that ecomodern masculinities, which acknowledge the crisis but opt for incremental technological solutions, has arguably become hegemonic in large parts of the global North as embodied in Elon Musk and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Hultman 2021).

Masculinities are always plural. They are shaped by wider societal practises and economic structures and can be performed simultaneously (Hultman and Pulé 2018). In this way they are always temporally and spatially situated in for example a body (both male and non-male), a society, or, as in this study, an order-of-discourse. The plurality of masculinities is also seen in a broad categorisation such as industrial/breadwinner, where the slash marks a class difference. While the industrial masculinities include the

owners of the means of production and the corporate CEOs of the fossil fuel companies that continue to heat our planet, not ‘from inner evil ... But [because] they are working in an insane elite world that institutionalises competitive, power-oriented masculinity, and they are doing whatever it takes’ (Connell 2017, 6), the breadwinners include the workers and former employees in extractive or polluting industries, who often have experienced dwindling economic prospects and social status in an era of neoliberalisation and deindustrialisation (Loomis 2017).

What the class difference marks in relation to our material, is that it is reasonable to assume that there is a difference between the ideologues of the sites and at least parts of their readerships. One of the more prominent columnists and Thunberg-critics on both *Samhällsnytt* and *Fria tider* is Jan Tullberg, a former assistant professor at the Stockholm School of Economics, thus having a similar background as several members of the Climate Realists. In an article on *Fria tider* titled: ‘The reason why PC [political correctness] is a totalitarian ideology’ Tullberg (2019a) argues that climate change, together with feminism and immigration, is an essential part of the political correct-ideology which seeks to take away well-earned privileges.<sup>4</sup> ‘The most successful, now-existing societies have been built by dead white men’ Tullberg writes, but even though ‘... the patriarchy already by its’ own accord has let women through ... [it is demanded that] ... white men can step back even further.’ With an obvious reference to Thunberg, Tullberg says that children are regarded to be naturally unspoiled, which creates an ‘infantile and emotional debate.’ Tullberg is defending his privileges as a leader in an industrial modern society – perceiving himself as heir to the ‘dead white men’ that built the country, but he is also trying to appeal to the breadwinners in a populist narrative. He constructs political correctness as a totalitarian ideology being forced upon the people. The climate threat, he lets us know, is being pushed by ‘... international organisations needing international problems ...’ and ‘[w]omen in general do not want more female politicians ... , it is the closest affected who wish to get affirmative action quotas’. Here Tullberg portrays political correctness as a creation of an emotional, feminine establishment, while he himself represents the rational voice of the people.

## Method and Corpus

Our analysis is based on how four far-right alternative media sites reported on climate change and on Greta Thunberg in the years 2018 and 2019. The four far-right media included in our study are *Nyheter idag*, *Fria tider*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Nya tider*. The first three are the three biggest, all reaching around 10 per cent of the Swedish online population (See Table 1) (Newman et al. 2020). *Nya tider* has less reach but is included as it also has a print edition, and therefore received €490,000 annually in state press subsidy during the studied period (Mediestödsnämnden 2019). All of them, apart from *Nya tider*,

**Table 1.** Reach of studied far-right alternative media sites and number of articles in corpus.

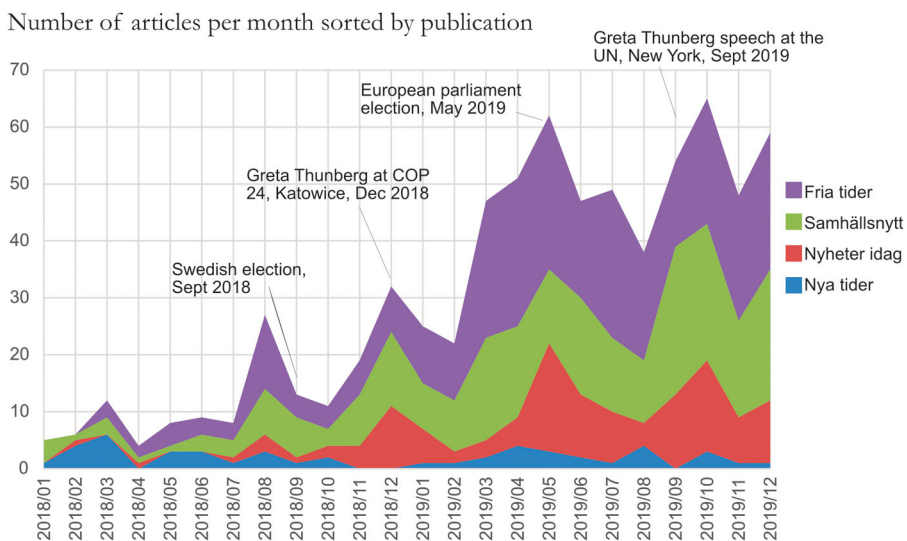
Medium	Reach of online population (Newman et al. 2020)	Number of articles in dataset
Nyheter idag	12	131
Fria tider	11	292
Samhällsnytt	9	251
Nya tider	6	47

increased the reporting on climate change during the studied period (see [Figure 1](#)). *Nyheter idag* stands out as the only medium which has been part of the Swedish self-regulatory media code of ethics. It is run and co-founded by Chang Frick, who used to be a member of the Sweden Democrats. As of June 15, 2020, the site presents itself on its website as ‘resting on a libertarian and liberal-conservative foundation’ (for further information about the other media, see [Vowles and Hultman 2021](#)).

Through a search in March 2020 in the Nordic digital press archive Retriever, using the search string ‘klimat\* OR uppvärmning OR \*greta\*’ (‘climate\* OR warming OR \*greta\*’), we received a total of 929 articles from the four sites. After removing 188 articles not related to climate change (mainly about the ‘political climate’ or similar), and 20 articles that either were duplicates, removed, or behind a paywall, the dataset was reduced to 721 articles. If articles behind the wall were available in the print edition of *Nya tider*, we accessed these through the Royal Library.

We see discourses as ‘being socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned’ (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258), and as such they are part of political and societal responses to climate change. Discourses are elements of social processes and the order-of-discourse is the semiotic aspect of an established social practice, which is situated in a wider social structure (Fairclough 2010). Seeing the far-right alternative media as a social practice, its order-of-discourse includes anti-establishment, anti-feminist and anti-immigration discourses. Climate change has recently been added to the list, and a critical analysis can provide information to why this has been done. Focusing mainly on the hostility to Greta Thunberg, we are striving to get a better understanding of the ideological reasonings and emotional entanglements that shape far-right responses to climate change.

To connect the hostility against Thunberg with previous work on climate change denial, we follow sociologist Stanley Cohen’s (2001) classification scheme of literal, interpretive and implicatory denial (for previous use in climate research, see e.g. [Björnberg et al. 2017](#); [Norgaard 2011](#)). The most relevant categories for this study are literal and



**Figure 1.** Number of articles per month per far-right alternative media site.

implicatory denial, where the former suggests that climate change is a hoax, and the latter is to deny the moral, political, and psychological implications of the knowledge. Cohen stresses that different types of denial often appear simultaneously, as their relationship is 'ideological, rather than logical' (Cohen 2001, 103).

In doing our analysis the articles have been read at least twice, using Nvivo to openly code e.g. themes, keywords, and tropes. As we are basing our analysis at the order-of-discourse level, we did a qualitative reading of a large number of articles, rather than a line-by-line analysis of a selected few. In our analysis we ask the following questions:

(1) What other discourses are connected to climate?

Anti-immigration, anti-establishment and anti-feminism are prevalent discourses of the far-right (Nygaard 2019; Wodak 2019). Here we try to see if, and if so how and why, climate change connects to these discourses?

(2) How is Greta Thunberg portrayed?

Here we look for semiotic aspects such as epithets and keywords to see how Thunberg is being perceived. We also analyse strategies for discrediting Thunberg and the climate change justice movement.

## The Many Names of Greta Thunberg

'Climate-Greta', 'the so-called climate activist Greta Thunberg', 'the climate-alarmist Greta Thunberg', 'climate-Messiah', 'Media's new favourite alarmist', 'doomsday guru', 'the Swedish climate icon', 'the influence-operation Greta Thunberg' or the 'PR-worker Greta Thunberg'. Greta Thunberg is given several different epithets, often in connection with her age, to dismiss her and her movement (the above epithets are respectively, but not exclusively, taken from Kristoffersson [Samhällsnytt] 2019a; Fria Tider 2019a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019j; Kristoffersson [Samhällsnytt] 2019b, 2019c).<sup>5</sup> The term 'so called' is widely used together with scare-quoting on *Fria tider* and *Samhällsnytt* to demark climate change as a ridiculous issue, without engaging with the science. When entitling Thunberg the 'so called climate activist' (e.g. Fria Tider 2019h) the signal is that it is impossible to be a climate activist, as climate change is not a problem. When talking about 'the influence-operation' or 'the PR-worker' Thunberg (Kristoffersson [Samhällsnytt] 2019b, 2019c), this ties into the conspiracy themes described further below, while epithets such as 'alarmist', 'messiah', and 'doomsday prophet' has a long legacy in contrarian climate change discourse (Coan et al. 2021). Satire is used when Thunberg is called 'media's new favourite alarmist' (Fria Tider 2019a), trying to ridicule legacy media that are reporting on Thunberg (for satire used against Greta Thunberg, see Konyaeva and Samsonova 2021).

Agism has previously been found in Youtube-comments about Thunberg (Park, Liu, and Kaye 2021) and is visible also in our data. It is regularly used to discredit her argument, as when Thunberg is coined person of the year 2018 in *Nyheter idag* (J. Norström 2019a), a year when '... the infantilisation of the Swedish public sphere finally was completed. Emotional, irrational and childish arguments filled both columns and debate-programs ... and children were regarded as truth-tellers and prophets.' A similar sentiment is found in *Samhällsnytt* (Tullberg 2019b): '... the infantile is regarded as the most authentic



and uncorrupted, we get teenage profits witnessing about the climate's [sic] approaching judgement day.'

There are slight differences in the discourses between the sites. The most pronounced is how *Nya tider* engaged in climate change science early on in 2018 but then did not increase its reporting. On the other sites, climate became increasingly important as a reaction to the visibility of the Thunberg-led movement. While *Samhällsnytt*, *Fria tider* and *Nya tider* all literally deny anthropogenic climate change, the discourse on *Nyheter idag* is one of implicatory denial, where the facts are not denied but the political and moral implications are. This can be seen in that while discrediting Thunberg and arguing against any mitigating action, *Nyheter idag* usually describe her accurately as a 'climate activist'. The difference in naming might be explained by how the sites relate to legacy media. While *Fria tider*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Nya tider* are clearly stepping outside established journalistic norms, *Nyheter idag* has signed up to the self-regulatory code of ethics.

### Thunberg as a Mentally ill PR-puppet, Part of Both a Globalist Regime and an Extreme Leftist Sect

Conspiracy theories have been a long-favoured tactic by the organised climate change countermovement, especially arguing that an elitist group is trying to enforce an international, globalist regime (Lewandowsky et al. 2015). The far-right media ecosystem, in which we count *Fria tider*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Nya tider*, is characterised by a propaganda feedback loop which allows identity-confirming and ideologically aligned disinformation to spread. This makes it prone to amplify conspiracy theories, and there are several concerning Thunberg. In April 2019, *Nya tider* posts an English article titled 'George Soros behind Greta Thunberg' (Persson 2019), which includes a manipulated photo where Soros' face is pasted on Thunberg's body. Picking up on a conspiracy getting attention in social media (Dave, Ndulue, and Schwartz-Henderson 2020), *Nya tider* connects Thunberg with Soros through the German climate activist Luisa-Marie Neubauer, as Thunberg and Neubauer appear in several photos together. Neubauer used to be a volunteer for the organisation One campaign, which was backed by Soros' Open society foundation, a circumstance which according to *Nya tider* proves that behind 'every world famous 16-year-old climate activist there is a liberal oligarch and a globalist movement' (Persson 2019). The article is widely shared on social media, 36,000 times according to *Nya tider's* own statistics, and it is later picked up by both *Samhällsnytt* (Westlund 2019) and *Fria tider* (2019g). The story then starts circling international far-right media in connection with the UN climate summit in New York in September 2019, with a manipulated photo of Thunberg and Al Gore made to look like she is standing next to Soros. The anti-Semitic conspiracy theory surrounding Soros can be traced back to the 1990s and has been especially focal in Hungary the last five years (Kalmar 2020).

Despite her stark message blaming politicians for failing her generation, Thunberg is often portrayed as being either part of, or manipulated by, the elite. Apart from the Soros conspiracy theory, there is a plot that she is '... an influence operation led by the PR-expert Ingmar Rentzhog, a person connected to several propaganda organs' (e.g. Kristoffersson [Samhällsnytt] 2019a). She is also often portrayed as a mentally ill child that has been manipulated and cynically used by her parents or other adults, as when *Samhällsnytt* (Putilov 2019) reports that several notices of concern have been

filed at the social services in Stockholm and quotes one notice as saying ‘... it’s not good for children with disabilities to be pressured ... I am worried that she is being physically or mentally abused and this makes her feel that her childhood is destroyed.’ There are also several articles connecting her with the non-violent, civil disobedience-movement Extinction Rebellion, XR, arguing that she is responsible for criminal activities by an extreme-left climate sect. One example is when *Samhällsnytt* (Aksoy 2019) writes about the founder of the ‘climate-sect’ XR. The article starts: ‘The extreme-left organisation Extinction Rebellion, which Climate-Greta has raised money for, has previously paid activists to disturb the public order – and claimed to be willing to bring down governments with deadly violence.’ In another article, XR-activists are simply referred to as ‘Greta-activists’ (Dagerlind [Samhällsnytt] 2019).

In a recent systematic review about conspiracies, Douglas et al. (2019) show that conspiracy-beliefs can in part be linked to perceived existential threats, and that people who feel powerless might turn to conspiracy theories to regain some sense of control in the socio-political realm. The attack on Greta Thunberg by the spreading of conspiracies ties into the anti-establishment and anti-Semitic discourse of the far-right. It is a politically motivated response to the idea of a nation, and its people, being threatened by an elite who wants to create a form of supranational governance. It is a conspiracy that can be appealing to someone who has lost a sense of direction in the world when climate change challenges the industrial/breadwinner legacy.

The anti-establishment rhetoric is reinforced by the way that Twitter and other social media are used in the reporting to provide a reaction to what has been told (cf., Homoláč and Mrázková 2021). In connection with a politician or a celebrity speaking out in support of Greta Thunberg, social media is used to portray the voice of the people, perceivably pointing out the madness of the politically correct elite (e.g. Zackrisson [Nyheter idag] 2019). This is further seen in discussions about whether media giants such as Facebook and Youtube are responsible for posts on their platforms. When Thunberg argues for Facebook to take responsibility for conspiracies spread about her, the far-right response is that she does not understand freedom of speech (e.g. B. Norström [Nyheter idag] 2019). Social media is seen as the protector of free speech, where citizens can get past legacy media’s gatekeepers.<sup>6</sup>

### **Greta Thunberg as a Threat to an Imagined Homogenous, Patriarchal, and Industrially Prosperous Community**

Thunberg has been opposed by far-right leaders all over the world. In their study on gendered nationalism, Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall (2020, 446) argue that when Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro opposed Greta Thunberg they prioritised ‘the defence and survival of the nation against globalising forces and scientific orthodoxy ... in [a] response to an emasculated sense of ontological insecurity.’ To understand this sense of ontological insecurity, we also need to consider the idea of the nation. In his work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (2016, 6) has defined the nation as an ‘imagined political community’ which is limited and sovereign. It is limited in that no nation is believed to encompass all of humankind, and it is sovereign as nations came into being in the age of the enlightenment, when the rule of dynasty and the supreme god crumbled in the pursuit of scientific rationale and the nation-state became the authority governing public life. This imagined

community is filled with deep seated emotions. Core features of the European far right is nativism, that every nation is the home to one ethnic community, and the idea of an endangered nation (Mudde 2007; Thorleifsson 2020). In an era of neoliberalism and globalisation when the world is changing fast, as for the industrial/breadwinner typologies, nationalism can offer a feeling of stability (Hobsbawm 1992, 171–73). The linguist Ruth Wodak (2019, 27) writes that the vision of the far-right is ‘an anachronistic longing for an ethnically homogenous patriarchal society’, and in our corpus there is a clear industrial modern aspect to such patriarchy. The imagined community of the far-right is a homogenous, patriarchal, and industrially prosperous one that needs to be defended at any cost. Where gender equity has dismantled patriarchal authority and immigration has made the community more multi-ethnic, climate change questions the industrial foundation of the modern welfare state. This can be seen in an article in *Fria tider* (2019i) stating that while ‘China is spending big to become world-leaders in technology, the EU is spending its money on other things: immigration from the third world and climate’ or when Thunberg (*Fria tider* 2019h) is ridiculed for wanted to stop Norwegian oil: ‘The oil has made Norway rich. Extremely rich. But now this might come to an end. At least if you listen to the Swedish climate alarmist Greta Thunberg’. Here it becomes clear that Thunberg and climate policies are perceived to be threatening the fossil fuelled modern economy and thus the wellbeing of the nation, which, as we have seen above, is argued to have been built by white men.

The connected discourses of immigration, gender and climate are spelt out by Ernst Wikmann (2019) on *Nya tider*, who claims that ‘the three pillars of political correctness [...] mass-immigration, feminism and climate alarmism (with accompanying globalism)’ has turned Sweden into a dictatorship that is going under. Or, in the words of *Samhällsnytt*’s columnist Rolf Malm (2019): ‘No political leader dare to speak frankly about the catastrophically failed integration of people born abroad and the fatal carbon dioxide-fear. The two elephants in the room that more than anything is behind Sweden’s decay.’ A doomsday sect led by a certain 15-year-old ‘... via her PR-company’ is, according to Malm, the biggest culprit in spreading the carbon dioxide-fear. A similar sentiment is seen in a column titled ‘Conservatism needs to become a counterforce to Greta Thunberg’s global climate sect’ by Ronie Berggren (2019) at *Nyheter idag*:

If capitalism is what raised humanity from poverty to wealth, it is the democratic nation-states that lifted humanity from tyranny to rule of the people / These things, which took centuries in combination with two world wars to create, are threatened in our times by the global climate sectarianism, which stamps people as climate sinners and older generations as traitors of the descendants.

The former of Malm’s elephants, integration and immigration, have long been focal in far-right alternative media (Holt 2019; Nygaard 2019), but the latter, embodied in Thunberg, has recently stumbled into the picture. In this discourse Thunberg and the climate justice-movement is a threat unHINGING the rationale behind the post-war industrial project and asks hard questions regarding international equity, economic growth, and material welfare. It also lays part of the blame on carbon intensive lifestyles, and hence on Swedish ways of living. In her in-depth study of Norway, an analysis which in parts can be extended to Sweden, sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard (2011: 218) describes how environmental privileges are hidden and perceived to have been well-earned. This has

allowed implicative, cultural denial to take hold in Norway, where an impoverished past is used to legitimize the country's oil production while still claiming to be an environmental forerunner. What Thunberg does through her intragenerational justice campaign, her moral stance and integrity (what Nässén and Rambaree [2021] call her transformational leadership) is to lay bare the privileges of the industrial/breadwinner masculinities in a developed nation in a carbon unequal world.

As a young, female climate activist, the hostility against Thunberg ties into an anti-feminist discourse. She is often portrayed as hysterical, which is exemplified in that all but one of the articles about her in *Nyheter idag* during the autumn of 2019 are illustrated by screen shots, often in extreme close-up, from her speech at the UN climate summit in September 2019 (e.g. Berggren 2019). In these images she is emotional and angry. When *Nyheter idag* use them in articles that are not related to the speech (e.g. J. Norström 2019b), it is used to dismiss Thunberg as irrational. It follows familiar tropes of feminine emotions versus masculine rationality, not least regarding energy and environmental issues. The same argumentation was used against the marine biologist and writer Rachel Carson when she published *Silent Spring*, warning about indiscriminate pesticide use in the US in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Carson was described as a sensitive and irrational woman, whose love of nature was pitted against a sound, masculine science (Seager 2017; Smith 2001). What Carson did was to highlight the fragile ecosystems, but her critics saw it as man's duty to dominate nature, as when an article in *Time* magazine argued that the idea of 'balance of nature' was irrelevant in an industrial society, as '... scientists realistically point out that the balance of nature was upset thousands of years ago when man's invention of weapons made him the king of the beasts' (cited in Smith 2001, 741). *Time* also claimed that Carson was 'hysterically emphatic', a sentiment echoed nearly 60 years later when, to take just one example, Fria tider (2019f) writes that Thunberg has scared several people on social media, not with her message, but through her 'hysterical behaviour.' This worldview resonates when *Samhällsnytt* claims that the Swedish government is in 'a process of moving from a rational patriarchy to an emotional feminism' (Tullberg 2019b), and when *Fria tider* reports on a survey about climate anxiety in an article titled: 'Young women worry about "climate", young men about immigration' (Fria Tider 2019b). By putting climate into scare quotes, *Fria tider* dismisses any reason for women to worry about climate, whereas men's worry about immigration is seen as rational and legitimate.

In a lengthier article published on *Nyheter idag*, its founder Chang Frick (2019) writes about how he started an electricity supplier company, *Svensk Kärnkraft* (Swedish Nuclear). 'Sweden as a nation is being dismantled', Frick writes, because people in power are listening to younger voices such as Thunberg, instead of 'natural authorities, not seldom so called "white middle-aged CIS-men"'. Working on national infrastructure projects such as the railway and the energy grid, these men were, in Frick's words, 'proud of what they had done and a natural part in a bigger machinery.' And 'as a direct consequence of the research and thinking done by the clever men' there are Swedish diesel engines in '... excavators, wheel loaders and boats all over the world'. Frick is flying the flag of Swedish fossil-based, male coded engineering. Perceiving that the flag is about to be lowered by a feminist climate movement trying to incite a transition to renewables, he launches his nuclear energy company, with the readers of *Nyheter idag* as the primary customer base.<sup>8</sup> Because of political correctness though, these clever,

white, middle-aged CIS-men have been socially marginalised according to Frick, which makes it more difficult to find potential business partners to the electricity supplier company. When contacting a potential partner company, instead of dealing with a clever man, it is a 'young blond girl with a nose ring' giving him information, and to her, apparently, nuclear power is not interesting.

Frick is both writing about and addressing the industrial/breadwinners typologies. He salutes their effort in the construction of Sweden and hopes this will resonate among his readership. As a response to the renewable transition the explicit turn to nuclear and the promotion of diesel engines can be understood as an act of refusal. Energy historian Cara Daggett (2018, 41) says: 'Refusal is active. Angry. It demands struggle. In the case of climate change, by refusing it, one also subscribes to an accelerated investment in petrocultures.' Frick can be seen to be investing in a masculine, industrial petroculture, especially as climate change is not an argument used to promote *Svensk Kärnkraft*. Even though the potential of nuclear in a low-carbon energy system is often debated, the only mention of climate on the company website as of 16 June 2020, is in the slogan '0 percent climate anxiety, 100 percent nuclear'. Considering the far-right discourse ridiculing climate anxiety seen above, the slogan is a provocation against the climate movement rather than a factual statement about carbon emissions from nuclear energy. The company argues for nuclear power as a 'stable and reliable' source of energy that will allow 'industries to keep growing and create jobs'. Nuclear power will save the industrial nation, the one perceived to be dismantled when society is listening more to Greta Thunberg than clever, elderly men.

## Discussion

It was relatively late in the autumn of 2018 that the Swedish far-right alternative media sites started writing about climate and Greta Thunberg. While Thunberg's school strike was widely reported in legacy media already in August 2018 and leading up to the Swedish election, it was only in connection to the climate summit in Katowice that the far-right started paying attention (see [Figure 1](#)). We can see two reasons for this. The first and main one is that the climate reporting on the far-right is reactionary. A topic so prominent in legacy media demanded a response, and far-right alternative media went from being silent on the topic, to spreading denial and being hostile to Thunberg. Especially when she gained international fame.

The second is that far-right media needed a way to discredit the movement. It was only when the conspiracy theories regarding Thunberg were created and started circling on social media that far-right media had a story fitting their worldview. A girl protesting politicians' inaction on climate change sitting alone outside the Swedish parliament was not a topic that could engage their readers, but a story about a girl being manipulated by the establishment, including her, in Sweden, well-known parents, was. Thus, this became their response – by connecting Thunberg to a global conspiracy and portraying her and the wider climate movement as hysterical, they could go on the attack.

Turning to our research questions we see that:

- (1) Climate change is connected to the anti-establishment discourse in many of the articles in our dataset. Before Greta Thunberg started her school strike, climate as

an issue is mentioned mainly when it can be directly tied to immigration (e.g. Fria Tider 2018), but later it becomes a prominent topic on its own. In the longing for an imagined homogenous, patriarchal, and industrial nation, climate change becomes a threat alongside immigration and feminism.

- (2) The far-right media deals with this threat by denying it. Either literally as in the case of *Fria tider*, *Samhällsnytt*, and *Nya tider*, or implicatively in the case of *Nyheter idag*. Through conspiracy theories and familiar tropes of female hysteria versus masculine rationality, Thunberg is discredited as emotionally unstable.

The Swedish far-right alternative media hardly wrote about climate change before 2018, and later research show that the topic dropped in importance in 2020 during the Covid-pandemic (Arnell and Blomberg 2021). What our study suggests however, is that it is an issue that cuts to the heart of the envisioned society of the far right, and which threatens the environmental privileges that comes from belonging to industrial/breadwinner typologies. This makes the reality of climate change difficult to accept for parts of the far right, but they can remain silent if the topic is not widely discussed in legacy media. When there is a chance of real mitigating action, however, and Greta Thunberg and the climate change justice-movement put pressure on governments all over the world to reduce emissions, the far-right media needs to act. Indeed, a parallel can be drawn to how the climate change-counter-movement in the US – from which the far right gets several arguments – took shape in the early 1990s as a response to the formation of the IPCC and James Hansen’s testimony in US congress. Then the fossil fuel industry, despite having their own climate change research, started spreading denial as they deemed climate regulation as a threat to their business model. Now Swedish far-right digital media are spreading denial as climate change policies are seen as a threat to their imagined community. This is also a lesson for the future, if ever it seems like literal climate denialism has disappeared, one reason might be a lack of any real mitigating action.

## Notes

1. The term ‘alternative media’ has traditionally been used for politically left leaning media. Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019, 861), however, argue that an umbrella definition of alternative media helps connect present research with previous literature. The essence is that alternative media perceive itself in opposition to a hegemonic media discourse ‘corrupted by, dependent on and uncritical of the establishment’. An umbrella definition does not claim that all alternative media are alike. Nygaard (2019) distinguish ‘immigration-critical alternative media’ but this term does not capture the ideological positions related to climate change. Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen (2019) uses the term ‘counter-media’ which highlights the oppositional character but misses the ideological dimension. Hence we use ‘far-right alternative media’, and, for short and interchangeably, ‘far-right media’.
2. In certain contexts, though, such as in the case of Australian bushfires, death-tolls are higher among men due to rural masculinities proposing that they should fight fires and defend the home, when women and children evacuate (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013).
3. Daggett (2018) has developed the concept ‘petro-masculinity’, which has considerable overlap with industrial/breadwinner masculinities.
4. All translations from Swedish to English done by first author.

5. The name of the site is put in square brackets when this is not apparent from the text or the reference.
6. In other cases the far-right discourse has shifted in relation to tech-giants such as Facebook and Twitter, and other platforms which claim not to moderate user content have become popular.
7. In Sweden, the leading environmental and energy politicians Birgitta Hambræus and Birgitta Dahl were subjected to similar abuse in the 1980s (Hultman, Kall, and Anshelm 2021).
8. Specifically, it could be argued that Frick's nuclear energy company is a reaction to the solar energy company started by the feminist and socialist newspaper ETC's founder Johan Ehrenberg (Wåg 2019).

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