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Reporting on the polarised 'forest issue': sensitive terminology, complex relationships, and centrifugal effects as challenges for journalistic role performance

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ABSTRACT

As the climate and biodiversity crises rapidly evolve, discussions about how forests should be governed and managed have intensified. In Sweden, the interests at stake are reflected in conflicting positions among established stakeholders, scientific disputes, and a polarised public forest debate. In this context, media's important democratic function is to provide citizens with balanced and pertinent information. This is, however, associated with challenges that deserve more attention from social science forest research. This study explores how Swedish journalists navigate tensions and complexities when covering the forest issue, and how the polarised character of the forest issue impacts their journalistic roles. A qualitative study of 17 semi-structured interviews with journalists suggests that they experience the forest issue as an "internal bubble" of conflicting interests, in which they need to: grapple with a diversity of expert information and sources; manage complex social networks; and be careful with choice of words, to avoid upsetting different parties. Forest coverage is endowed with "centrifugal effects", which pull the journalists into one of the polarised ends of the public forest debate, namely production versus protection, and where they over-curate their reporting to avoid accusations of being biased. These challenges can contribute to journalists being viewed as both producers and victims of polarisation; the latter might cause issue avoidance, in which journalists refrain from covering the forest issue altogether. Our conclusion is that the polarisation of the forest issue closes down rather than opens up for rethinking how forests are understood and acted upon.

1. Introduction

There are increased calls for transformation in global, as well as national, forest policy and governance. In many European countries, and in the European Union (EU), these calls are connected to the loss of biodiversity paired with climate change, and have spurred an interest in alternative forest management, such as continuous cover forestry (CCF) and closer-to-nature forestry, which prioritise restoration and maintenance of a broad spectrum of ecological, social, and economic benefits to enhance the resilience of forest ecosystems (Dawson et al., 2025). This, however, collides with interests related to the dominating industrial forestry, which has been criticised to prioritise economic values over environmental ones (Hertog et al., 2022). These different interests, combined with the multiple functions and values of forests (Ritter and Dauksta, 2012), results in variation between actors in their understanding of whether, and how, forestry should be transformed.

About 70% of the land area of Sweden is covered by forests (Andersson et al., 2026). Forestry in Sweden is dominated by industrial management, mostly directed at the production of pulp and softwood timber (Beland Lindahl et al., 2017). The calls for transformation of existing management systems imply high economic stakes for industrial forestry actors, as transformation challenges the paradigm of industrial even-aged forestry with regular clear-cuts (Dawson et al., 2025). The Swedish Forest Act allows for a large degree of freedom for forest owners to practice forestry in different ways (Eriksson, 2018); however, a deep-rooted sector culture, forestry education, timber markets and industry networks that all privilege intensive wood production, hamper change to alternative forest management practices (Hertog et al., 2022; Dawson

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et al., 2025). A strong organisational production logic within the sector, with structural constraints in addressing challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change through local or bottom-up approach, results in a lack of tree species diversity and limited variation in forest management practices (Andersson and Keskitalo, 2018; Andersson et al., 2026). The disagreements on how forests should be managed have thus paved the way for the establishment of a *forest issue*, characterised by a dualism with conflicting views: defence of economics and production focus versus ecosystems and nature protection. This has been highlighted in several Swedish studies (see Fischer et al., 2020; Hallberg-Sramek et al., 2020; Holmgren et al., 2022; Hallberg-Sramek et al., 2024). In this study, we will refer to issues related to forestry and forest as a singular definite *forest issue,* to emphasise its polarised character. In addition to their economic value, Swedish forests have a central role in culture and national identity (Andersson et al., 2026). The high proportion of private ownership, with 330,000 individuals owning almost 50% of forest land in Sweden (Swedish Forest Agency, 2023), together with the public's right to access the Swedish forests, help explain the personal connection felt by many Swedes to forest land (Sténs and Sandström, 2014). In addition to this widespread engagement in forests, increasing media coverage and intensive debate about forestry in Sweden in recent years has made the forest issue accessible to a wider array of media users.

As Park and Kleinschmit (2016) suggest, professional journalism shapes how different actors understand and act upon the forest issue. Through their agenda-setting power (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Coleman et al., 2009; Crow and Lawlor, 2016; Djerf-Pierre and Shehata, 2017), media influence which issues the public consider important, and they highlight issues of relevance for policy and policy makers in the forestry sector. Despite the objectivity ideal of journalism, media select which actors and interests are considered important, and decide how the forest issue is framed, which can lead to polarisation (Park, 2013; Park and Kleinschmit, 2016; Hallberg-Sramek et al., 2020). Media's tendency to sometimes simplify complex issues in a polarised way, by providing a "us" versus "them" rationale, prompts questions about in what contexts journalists are "victims" of polarisation and in what contexts they rather become co-producers of the polarised debate, but also questions about how media might counteract polarisation.

When it comes to the polarised character of the forest issue in the media, our points of departure are two related types of polarisation: *ideological* polarisation, which emphasises how the particular political disagreement generates contrasting worldviews, or more precisely"divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and stances of political adversaries" (Dalton, 1987); and *affective* polarisation, which involves identity and group-thinking conflicts in which emotional discourses around "us" versus "them" become prominent, thereby making dialogue and mutual understanding difficult to achieve (Mason, 2018; see also Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021 and Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). However, little is known about the challenges for journalism when it comes to managing the inherent polarisation challenges of the forest issue, which exist with or without the media, and journalists' ability to cover the diversity of perspectives and interests in forests (Berglez, 2011; Berglez et al., 2025). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how Swedish journalists covering the forest issue experience and navigate polarisation. We are particularly interested in how the journalists adhere to, adjust and renegotiate different roles associated with journalistic professionalism (Mellado, 2015).

2. Polarisation in and through the media

2.1. Polarised debates about environmental issues

There are many examples of journalism research focusing on polarisation in the context of environmental topics. Media studies on climate change have demonstrated how journalistic practice might contribute to polarisation, as well as how polarisation makes it difficult for journalists to provide relevant information to actors with conflicting worldviews (Bolsen and Shapiro, 2018). Other studies show how the climate change issue has become increasingly politicised and polarised over time (Chinn et al., 2020). In a study of climate change articles in US newspapers, Chinn et al. (2020) find that scientific actors feature this aspect of the news less often than political actors, and that the diverging discourses of opposing political stands on climate change are increasingly emphasised in the coverage. Another topic that has been studied empirically with a focus on attitudinal expressions in the media is the wolf issue (Houston et al., 2010; Hartwig, 2024). Here, media polarisation, with different media outlets covering the wolf issue in rather contrasting ways, reinforces diverging public perspectives on the issue (Trainotti et al., 2024). Renewables and energy transition are also topics gaining increasing attention from media scholars, who suggest that media coverage on energy transition and interest in a sustainable transition are characterised by a conflict between the elite (positive to renewables) versus the people (negative to renewables) (cf. Carmichael and Brulle, 2017). Moving into the forest issue, Hallberg-Sramek et al. (2020) analyse how the concept of woodland key habitats is framed by Swedish media, showing that there is a dominating frame that favours nature conservation, represented by government agencies, journalists and environmental organisations. This is challenged by an opposing frame, represented by forest owners, that highlights the implication of nature conservation for their economy. Sténs and Mårald (2020) observe another recurring theme in the media debate about the forest issue, namely forest property rights. In their study, they show how the media debate on this resembles an echo chamber, where a few actors repeat similar arguments, which, the authors argue, locks important questions on sustainable forestry into a narrow social sphere.

2.2. Polarisation in relation to journalists' role and role performance

In the context of this study, it is of particular interest how traditional *journalistic roles* might be affected, and possibly transformed, by polarisation in the case of the forest issue. Donsbach (2008) defines roles as "Generalized expectations which journalists believe exist in society and among different stakeholders, which they see as normatively acceptable, and which influence their behaviour on the job" (Donsbach, 2008: 1). The definition highlights both the importance of the expectations or norms that the journalists relate to, and the actual performance of the journalists, which are two interrelated dimensions of journalistic professionalism (Mellado et al., 2017). While roles capture the stable ideals of what is important for the journalist to do, according to themselves and their professional culture (Zelizer, 1993), role performance instead addresses the actual practice of the journalists, i.e., what they "do" (Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2017; Perreault and Mellado, 2024).

Often, journalistic professionalism is studied in terms of identifying specific journalistic roles and how they highlight different journalistic values (Wiik and Johansson, 2025). The most recognised role is associated with the norm of objectivity, factuality and impartiality (Johansson, 2019), which is prominent in Nordic media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Berglez et al., 2025). Examples of different journalistic roles are *objective news providers, critical watchdogs, sense-makers and educators,* and *environmental advocates* (see Table 1) (Mellado, 2015; Hujanen et al., 2024). In a Nordic study, Ahva (2022) suggests that Nordic journalists are reluctant to take on a role as advocates of social change; instead, social responsibility is promoted through journalistic ideals that are associated with an educating role, enabling dialogue, to reduce polarisation in society. Studies of climate change reporting show that journalists generally oppose the role of serving as a fourth estate (critical watchdog), and instead choose balanced reporting (Keilmann et al., 2025). But balanced reporting can be problematic in terms of giving scientifically established knowledge and unverified theories similar weight in the reporting (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007).

Ojala (2021) suggests that environmental journalists' professional roles are changing, from neutrality and impartiality ideals to

Table 1
Examples of journalistic roles, selected and adapted by the authors from Mellado (2015) and Hujanen et al. (2024).

Examples of journalistic roles	Description
Objective news provider	Emphasis on facts, accuracy and balanced reporting by not taking sides.
Critical watchdog	Emphasis on the responsibility of being critical to those in power.
Sense-maker and educator	Emphasis on their responsibility in relation to the media user, to interpret (educate) news events to help the media user in their daily life.
Environmental advocate	Role where the journalist represents the perspective of nature and the environment in their coverage.

partisanship. Other studies focus on how the journalistic roles can be described and conceptualised in a general sense (Hanitzsch, 2007; Donsbach, 2008) or appear in specific journalistic specialisations, such as service journalism (Eide and Knight, 1999). Hujanen et al. (2024) describe that the Nordic environmental journalists in their study, regardless of their role identification, in one way or another intervene in their reporting, i.e., impact on how audiences interpret, make sense of, and engage in the reported issue. The journalists in the study do all intervene in different ways depending on their different roles, by adhering to professional norms and practices while also renegotiating their roles. Fahy and Nisbet (2011) and Strauss et al. (2021) observe how science journalists have moved from a gatekeeping role, in which they (only) disseminate facts, translate complex information and neutrally inform the media user, to a curating role, where the journalist is required to be more active in identifying content, evaluating it, and presenting it, with a strong focus on the audience. Furthermore, Strauss et al. (2021) find that journalists mostly identify with the role of a sense-maker and educator, followed by the roles of a neutral or impartial observer, curator, watchdog, gatekeeper and other (e.g., opinion writer). In line with Ahva (2022) and Keilmann et al. (2025), they find that the role journalists associate the least with is that of an advocate. Journalists also adjust their roles to different contexts and specific issues. Wiik and Johansson (2025) highlight the internal milieu of the journalist, i.e., the social and cultural environment in which journalism is conducted (Hanitzsch, 2007). The milieu shapes the journalist and vice versa. The concept of journalistic role performance has been used in different context but has in common that it focuses on the specific practises of journalists, as a result of particular journalistic roles (Mellado et al., 2017; Mellado and Hallin, 2024). Mellado (2015) categorise journalistic role performance by identifying aspects of the journalist's performance, such as the level of presence of the journalistic voice in the news story, their relation to those in power and to the media user.

Still to be examined, is how traditional *journalistic roles* might be affected, and possibly transformed, by polarisation in the case of the forest issue. Furthermore, we also aim to better understand whether and how *journalistic role performance* are affected by changes in the journalistic roles. The journalists in focus for our study are situated within the Swedish media landscape and in the specific and polarised milieu of the forest issue. We base our analysis on interviews with 17 Swedish journalists, and to guide our inquiry we pose the following two research questions:

RQ1: In what ways does the polarised character of the forest issue generate challenges for journalists in their coverage?

RQ2 What are the consequences for their roles and role performance?

3. Methods and material

3.1. Data collection

Data collection was carried out in three main phases: selecting and contacting the interviewees, designing the interview guide, and conducting the interviews. These phases were followed by the data analysis. The work of contacting potential interviewees was ongoing during the study, to allow for snowball sampling and to make sure that the data sample would be diverse, in terms of representation, certain specialities or types of media outlets. Prior to the data collection, the study received ethics approval by The Swedish Ethical Review Authority. In this section, each phase of the data collection will be explained in detail.

For the journalists to be selected for the interview study, they must have either worked regularly covering forest-related issues or have done a larger journalistic product about forest-related issues (such as a reportage series). The sample was also selected to cover journalists working with different types of media outlets and with different specialisations. The typology of the reporters was mostly based on how the journalist self-identified, but also by looking at how they were presented when publishing in media outlets. In addition, the sample included journalists at national as well as local level, and of different ownership structures (see Tables 2 and 3). Interviewees were selected based on a mapping of who was active in media coverage about the forest issue, and by snowball sampling. 24 journalists were approached for interviews, of whom 17 was included in the study. One interview was excluded due to the journalist's limited experience in covering forest-related issues, something which became apparent during the interview; five journalists declined participation, due mostly to time constraints; and one journalist did not respond to the interview request, despite several reminders.

Most of the interviewed journalists work within news media; however, there are examples of niche journalists working with specific topics, such as science, environment or politics or for industry magazines (Table 2). This has potential implications for their way of working and the resources available to them, as well as for their roles and role performance. However, the intention in this study is not to compare journalists with different specialisations or from different milieus.

The interview guide had a broad focus, using open questions about the journalists' experiences of covering the forest issue and about the performance of journalistic work. These implied questions aimed at understanding their methods of working: how they approach interviewees and sources, and reactions to their coverage; how they retrieve and evaluate information; previous knowledge about forest and forestry; their selection of sources; how they view aspects such as legitimacy, risk and considerations in reporting; and what they need to have in order to do their job, etc. The questions were guided by other interview-based studies on climate-related journalism (Berglez, 2011; Hujanen et al., 2024) and on studies focusing on journalistic roles and role performance (Fahy and Nisbet, 2011; Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2017; Schäfer and Painter, 2020). This resulted in questions such as

Table 2
Codes, specialisation and type of media outlet for the interviewees presented in Section 3 (developed by the authors).

#	Specialisation	Type of media outlet
J1	Environmental reporter	Employed, Public service
J2	Forest reporter	Previously Employed, Industry magazine
J3	Forest reporter	Freelance, Industry magazine
J4	Forest reporter	Freelance, Industry magazine
J5	Investigative reporter	Previously Freelance, National media
J6	Environmental reporter	Employed, Niche magazine
J7	Science reporter	Employed, National media
J8	Science reporter	Employed, Public service
J9	Forest reporter	Freelance, Industry magazine
J10	Investigative reporter	Employed, National media
J11	Environmental reporter	Employed, Local media
J12	Science reporter	Employed, Public service
J13	General reporter	Employed, Local media
J14	Forest reporter	Employed, Industry magazine
J15	Political reporter	Employed, Niche media
J16	General reporter	Employed, Local media
J17	Investigative reporter	Employed, Public service

Table 3
Description of the media outlets presented in Table 2.

Media category	Description
National media	Nationally distributed privately-owned news media, including newspapers
Local media	Locally distributed privately-owned newspapers
Public service	Nationally broadcasted public service television and radio
Industry magazines	Nationally distributed newspapers specialised in the forest sector
Niche magazines	Nationally distributed media with specific angle, e.g., environment or politics

"Does covering forest related issues differ from other areas you cover; if yes, how? "What areas within the forest topisc are easy or difficult to cover; why is that?" Furthermore, the interview guide was also developed from following forest debate taking place in Swedish traditional media.

Interviews were conducted in person (10) and via video meetings on Zoom (7) with a total of 17 journalists, of which 7 are female and 10 male. The interviews were conducted in Swedish by the first author; quotes included in the final manuscript have been translated to English by the authors. The interviews took place between November 2023 and February 2025, each lasting between 60 and 90 min. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewees to express what they find relevant to the subject and for the researcher to ask follow-up questions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

To ensure that the interviewed journalists remain as anonymous as possible, all collected data is pseudonymised through, for example, each respondent being assigned a unique code (Table 2). To support anonymity, details such as the journalists' gender or place of employment are not associated to their code. Given the public nature of journalism within a small country like Sweden, the reader familiar with Swedish forestry might possibly be able to identify the interviewees participating in the study. This risk has been discussed with all interviewees prior to the interviews. In addition to signing a consent form, the interviewees were offered the opportunity to read transcripts and quotes prior to publishing.

3.2. Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically coded, using the software Nvivo. The coding was conducted in three consecutive rounds and followed an inductive and iterative approach. Firstly, we formulated three questions to guide our analysis and address the research questions. The first two questions addressing the roles and roles performance were: 1. *How do the journalists view their task in covering forestry?* and 2. *How do the journalists practically go about doing their job?* Here, we looked for the journalists' implicit and explicit utterances of their view of themselves, further divided into codes reflecting on how they, for instance, view the media user, refer to journalistic norms, and select informants. In parallel, we were also interested in how the journalists experienced working specifically with forest and forest related topics. This was captured in question 3. *How do the journalists experience covering specifically the forest issue?* Guided by these questions, we conducted an initial analysis and further refined the codes. In relation to question 1, this resulted in sub-codes, such as: their motivation to report on the forest, how they view journalistic norms, whether there are things that conflict with their view on their roles, and whether they combine different roles (e.g., investigative and objective news provider). Relating to question 2, the second round of coding established new codes on how the journalists view media users, how they collect and select informants, how they connect their practical work to their view on their own roles as a journalist, and contextual factors that influence their job. In relation to question 3, utterances that indicated journalists' experiences of covering the forest issue compared to other issues and experiences of resistance were captured in the coding.

The third round of coding established how the journalists in our study relate to journalistic roles and journalistic role performance. In addition, three challenges of the forest issue were identified that conceptualise the internal polarisation of the issue based on the interviews. These final codes, which are further elaborated in Sections 4 and 5, form the basis of the results.

4. Results and analysis – The internal-polarised character of the forest issue coverage and the implications for journalistic roles and role performance

An overall result from the interviews is that the journalists, in different ways, articulate the polarised forest issue as *internal*, meaning that the journalists' work appears to involve and take place within a small and conflict-laden community or "bubble". This we illustrate by presenting three challenges of the internal-polarised character of the forest issue, observed through the interviews – *specialised language and value-laden terminology, actor and information relationships,* and *centrifugal effects* – and their impact on journalistic roles and role performance.

4.1. Specialised language and value-laden terminology: language matters

To begin with, covering the forest issue is like being in a "bubble" with an "internal language" that journalists must be sensitive to and adhere to, in order to avoid conflicts and further polarisation. The journalists describe the scientific and technical language as challenging. As different actors use different wordings to convey their message, the journalists feel obliged to be careful, not only with how they describe the forest issue, but also in their formulations and choice of wording, as they know it will have implications for how the coverage will be perceived by media users and established actors in the forest sector. It makes the forest issue seem like a "semiotic minefield".

The sensitivity lies in the actual terminology, making it necessary for the journalists to "control" this specialised vocabulary. The journalists highlight that they spend a great deal of time and effort in understanding the terminology so that they are able to cover the topic. J14 explains that the terminology is indeed a large part of understanding the complexity of the forest issue. J14's way of approaching it has been to take a university course in forest management, which also indicates that the threshold for understanding and reporting about forestry is quite high.

> *Yes, in the beginning there is a lot to learn. And there are a lot of terms and so on. But this course [in forest management] I took was very good, with basic … comprehending quite a few different areas. Then, the thing is that I am a journalist. I am not a forester or something […] I am not supposed to know everything, what you do is that you talk to people who know. […] Then you have to learn different terms and so on. And that comes gradually.* (J14, forest reporter, employed).

What becomes apparent in the interviews is that the journalists themselves are potentially part of the "internal language". They might use a complex vocabulary and words that are used to signal a certain expertise meaning for those who are well-versed in the subject. Examples are phrases such as "substitution effect" and "climate benefits of growing trees, respectively trees left standing".

Those in broader society who wish to take part in the discussion must understand the specialised vocabulary. For example, J7 notes that a common understanding for the terms he uses when covering news about the forest issue is presently lacking, and that the terminology requires a lot of explanation to enable readers to understand. This is in contrast to topics such as climate change, which despite its scientific nature has gradually developed a more well-established and "popular" vocabulary (e.g. CO2-emissions, the 1.5 degrees' goal) that is understood by many media users.

> *[…] You must explain quite a lot, because you can't assume that a [newspaper] reader knows a lot. And I always get that response from*

editors. "Can you explain what a coarse woody debris is? You have to describe what it is. You can't just write it". Or, when it comes to carbon sinks and things like that. Maybe now you can start to use it without explaining it. All those concepts, net storage. It has to be explained all the time. What is continuity forest, you always have to include that in a fact box, natural forest, old growth forest. (J7, science reporter, employed).

The more journalists strive to explain complex matters to audiences, the greater the risk that some groups will complain about the language use and terminology. To some extent, these understandings seem almost implicit. Such as when the journalists, or the actors covered by the journalists, are using certain expressions or words that carry with them a greater meaning than the word or expression itself. It is not only about formulations or specific words, but also about which topics are brought up when communicating about forestry. One example comes from journalist J3, who refers to a particular bird species that carries with it a wider meaning, to illustrate the one-sidedness of the position of a media outlet he often works for as a freelance journalist. However, the reference is understood only by those who share an implicit understanding of the bird's relation to the forest issue:

They [media outlet] don't want to talk about anything other than timber. […] they kind of want to talk about how important it is to do thinning and that the plantation is managed in a good way obtaining [timber] production. But then they [media-outlet] have to write something about it sometimes, when there's a palaver about ***three-toed woodpeckers****, then they must do something about it and so on. And then they give their subjective account of it* (emphasis added by the article authors). (J3, forest reporter, freelance).

Here, mention of the three-toed woodpecker, a bird that is reliant on old forest land and which forest owners are obliged to protect, signals that this stakeholder needs to consider nature values in addition to timber production; just by mentioning the bird, one is expected to understand this. This example illustrates how journalists need to navigate the implicit understandings signified by certain topics, wording and, as in this case, species. This is necessary both to understand the forest issue well enough to cover it, and to anticipate potential reactions to a coverage.

To navigate this technical and symbolic language of the forest issue, we find that the journalists must penetrate both complex scientific language and uncover what value-laden and sometimes sensitive meanings different stakeholders in the forest sector may assign to different expressions, topics or formulations. The forest issue is part of a context where different words are associated with different sides of the polarised debate and because the wording is so value-loaded, journalists must balance their choice of wording and be mindful about the messages they convey.

The interviews show that journalists covering the forest issue do not just translate and popularise the complex issue for the public, acting as an objective news provider (Hujanen et al., 2024). Rather, it is necessary for them to take on the role of the sense-maker and educator about the forest issue, interpreting the technical and symbolic language and participating in "internalisation" of this complex language through their coverage. In the interviews we also see how the journalists, in their actual role performance, themselves become part of the *internal logic* (i.e. reasoning that makes a particular context make sense from within itself) they cover, instead of only doing what journalism is known for, namely, simplifying complex issues by means of their own (media-oriented) language (Berglez, 2011).

4.2. Actor and information relationships

From the journalists' horizon, what also makes the forest issue internal-polarised is the sector's (including actors from industry, academia, authorities, etc.) highly networked and entangled character, involving both consensual and conflicting relationships. When seeking to cover the polarised forest issue in a balanced manner, journalists are often faced with the overwhelming task of understanding the positions of different stakeholders and forest researchers: how they relate to each other in terms of opinions, scientific claims, and vested interests. The journalists experience that the information provided by different groups of actors and expertise depends on their underlying political or economic interests. Understanding actor relationships is important to assess the legitimacy and validity of different information sources and the information they provide. Many forest facts and 'truths' are contested and diverge depending on which actor you turn to, what forest stakes they have, and their position in the sector. J6 accentuates how the forest issue is harder to grasp than the topic of climate change, due to the contradictory views within the former. J6 describes how he experiences the forest issue as more contested than the scientific debate about climate change:

I have worked with the environment, climate, and I got into this forest issue quite late. […] as you probably know, there are so many conflicting, as well as strong opinions about it. […] …it feels more infected. But even if there is a small part that may be infected in the climate issue as well, it is probably a much smaller part, a smaller proportion that questions the science. And then again, science [about general climate issues] is not at all as divided about what they say is needed. (J6 environmental reporter, employed).

J11 experiences that the information about forestry can seem contradictory and hard to grasp, and that this emphasises the role that journalists have in disentangling different strands of information and placing them in relation to each other. J11 tries to report based on research consensus, to as large an extent as possible, but at the same time, she thinks that it is difficult to find consensus. One strategy is to avoid "he says, she says" journalism, and instead investigate which facts hold, while guiding the reader in how to interpret the information.

It can become kind of animated discussions, say this about creeping lady's tresses or … and property rights, and all that, and then it feels important as a journalist to show yes, but how common is it that you can't log *as much as you like? How much of nature is protected? Is the forest actually protected? So, you get … so the reader gets an idea of the proportions. […] And I thought that it doesn't get any better from the fact that it's a really high-pitched, uptight tone, where maybe both sides in the debate use very simplified and hard-edged statements. You don't gain anything from that if you want to try to get ahead on an issue, but it feels like it's just about everyone digging themselves even deeper into their own trenches, rather than trying to achieve something."* (J11, environmental reporter, employed).

The interviews also indicate that researchers and other stakeholders often communicate to the journalists that they distrust each other, which makes the forest sectors seem like a network of personal and internal conflicts. J10 explains how this makes it complicated to navigate the forest issue:

Very difficult. Precisely because it is so polarised even among researchers. They are jeering in this criticism against each other in the forest sector and among researchers. Such as: " this one you should not listen to, he…". So, I have simply tried to talk to as many people as possible. There have also been several things that have made it more difficult to navigate the research and facts about the forest because there are so many people [researchers and experts] who work very closely to the industry who actually have their own financial interests in the forestry industry." (J10 investigative reporter, employed).

According to several of the journalists interviewed, the strongly conflicting opinions expressed by different actors, and the fact that research and vested interests are closely intertwined, are features that are particular to the coverage of the forest issue.

Another related aspect illustrating the importance of internal relationships, has to do with the journalist's choice of informants and

interviewees. Several journalists experience that their selection of interviewees is unexpectedly received as controversial, even though they interview people according to their normal routines. However, after publication, the journalists notice that the people who contribute to their coverage are, by some groups, considered to represent a controversial view of forestry, and simply by offering them media space, journalists are regarded as one-sided and less credible. It is evident that the different actors described recognise and know about each other, something that is confirmed in several interviews. This strengthens the impression that the forest issue operates within a limited bubble of actors who position themselves strongly in relation to each other. A quote from journalist J12 exemplifies how individuals become emblematic in the sense that their mere presence in coverage generates very strong responses:

> *… just the fact that we had interviewed [actor that promotes forest conservation] [and that he] is employed by [Forest Conservation Organisation] made people almost go crazy with outrage. It's these kinds of things … otherwise like when you … you can interview people from different sides. Now we're doing a programme about energy, we interview someone from [Environmental non-governmental organisation], […] no one goes crazy about that or gets like "how can you interview this person?" That's how media works, right. You interview different people with different expertise or positions and … yes, to get an interesting and comprehensive picture of different positions. But no, there was a very agitated atmosphere in some places…* (J12 science reporter, employed).

The positions the journalists themselves have in relation to the forest issue and the forest sector, also play a role for their credibility. The journalists experience that they are not only assessed based on what or how they cover, but also on their own background and relationship to forestry. Among the interviewees, there are those who have a professional background in forestry and those that have little or no previous experience with the forest sector. Journalists generally cover many different subjects, but when covering the forest issue, the journalists' own (internal) connections to the sector seem to play a greater role. Interviewees highlight that having a forest background stifles critical journalism, as the journalist may be less critical of large forest actors because of their own involvement. This illustrates how the background and personal connections of the journalists also place the journalists in a position of potential partiality. Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, journalists without a background in the forest sector express a feeling that they are not perceived as credible:

> *But then there are individual forest owners who have also contacted me and think [they] that I… don't know anything, I haven't worked with forests. I'm not trained in the forest manager programme and I have no experience. [They say] It's typical for 'Stockholmers' [people from the capital of Sweden], who come and don't have anything… who speak out about things they have no clue about.* (J10 investigative reporter, employed).

The quote illustrates that if a journalist does not meet the norm of being well-versed in the forestry sector – typically defined as someone with a forestry education and a rural background – their credibility may be called into question, even though they have endeavoured to understand the topic, using standard journalistic methods.

These examples illustrate how the journalists need to understand the relationships between the actors in the internal forest "bubble" in their role performance. The way that different actors relate to each other, and the position of the journalists themselves in connection to the forest issue, complicate the journalistic roles. More time and resources are required, regardless of which perspective or journalistic roles that the journalists adopt. In terms of the role of the objective news provider, the journalists struggle to find reliable facts, to be balanced and to not exacerbate polarisation. Furthermore, journalists working in the spirit of critical watchdogs, perceive the forest issue as particularly sensitive and are often accused of adopting the role of an environmental advocate, while they maintain that they work according to their usual practices of investigative journalism. In the role as sense-makers and educators, the journalists must put a lot of effort into the clarification and interpretation of information, since they think it is difficult for media users to know what information and which actors are accountable. This implies that the sense-making role sometimes resembles the role of the watchdog, as the internal power structures need to be disentangled to reveal what information is relevant. This involvement in the coverage is both time consuming and a challenging task for the journalist, that affects their role performance. It is risky for the journalists to include an expert in coverage, and classify information about forestry as neutral facts, without having a prior understanding of the power relations within the forest sector: for example, when there are diverging knowledge claims and actors are considered controversial by some strands in the forest debate.

4.3. Centrifugal effects

A third dimension of the internal-polarised character of the forest issue is the centrifugal effect. By centrifugal effect we mean that journalists, when intending to cover the forest issue from a "neutral" point of view, become "drawn into" the conflicts, which might also affect actors included in the media coverage. As illustrated in Section 4.2, the journalists need to carefully disentangle what is correct and relevant information to cover objectively and in a balanced manner. Several of the journalists struggle with diverging knowledge claims, where, for instance, forest researchers express different opinions on what should be considered sustainable forestry. However, even though journalists try providing a balanced picture of the matter they are accused of being partial by some media users and stakeholders in the forest sector. J7 explains:

> *Yes. The climate benefits of forestry […] it causes a lot of commotion every time we write about it. And there are researchers who completely contradict each other. I would say that it is the kind of thing that most journalists are really avoiding writing about now, because it is too controversial. We have colleagues who say "no, I can't handle writing about the forest, not about the forest and the climate because it is too hard, it is too difficult". […] it is controversial and the fact that different research communities stand in opposition to each other. That means that you can be accused of being biased. […]. It is not only that it takes time, but it is that you take a risk every time you write about this. Because your credibility is all you have.* (J7 science reporter, employed).

J10 gives a similar account of the experience of writing about the forest issue. In this quote, J10 talks about stakeholders in the forest sector who criticise coverage that is sensitive to them, referring to flaws that are not actually there: the coverage does not contain any factual errors.

> *There were so many attacks like that from many different directions, from powerful authorities. I have never experienced something like this. People in power who sit around trolling. Even though I use the same methods to scrutinise the forestry industry that I have used in all other journalistic scrutiny that I have done before. But when I use those methods, I am an activist in their eyes.* (J10 investigative reporter, employed).

The different knowledge claims and the fear of being considered less trustworthy by media users forces several of the journalists to spend time on proactively seeking to avoid accusations of partiality. This can imply a disproportionate amount of fact checking by several in the organisation.

Hence, the strive for impartiality does not mean that the journalists are perceived as neutral; instead, the journalists covering the forest issue are often perceived as biased or, in some cases, activists. When observing and covering the forest issue from the outside, in one way or another, the journalists tend to become "drawn" into either side of the conflicts. A possible reason is that, for different actors and stakeholders,

an external journalistic position is likely to be considered as evidence of them taking sides, something which has previously been observed in studies of climate change journalism (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007). Not only the journalists, but also "neutral" sources included in the coverage by the journalists might become drawn into the conflicts. Journalist J18 provides an example of an investigative reportage about actors in the forest industry, where a public official was interviewed about biodiversity values. The coverage generated strong reactions, not only against the journalist and media company, but also against the public official.

> *But that the atmosphere became so harsh then, we got a lot of emails, about him [saying that he is] a tree-hugger, more or less. Just […] because he was a civil servant […] then it is suddenly like the Swedish Forest Agency has been taken over by environmental activists, or something. […] And then when I got into the issues or worked on these projects … Good lord, this is a matter of life and death. This is like the most pressing issue we have in Sweden [laughter]. Oh my God, I've never been attacked by lobby organisations in the same way about anything else. Not in that way anyway. […]* (J18 investigative reporter, employed).

This example illustrates how the media coverage of the forest issue quickly becomes associated with "taking sides", where the coverage, as well as the actor participating in the coverage, are deemed biased. Consequently, people who would normally participate in the media become reluctant to express their standpoints due to anticipated strong reactions among particular groups and interests. As journalists are dependent on their sources, this tendency is problematic for the journalists.

Ideologically, the "centrifugal effect" operates differently depending on type of media outlet. While the quotes presented earlier in this section derive from mainstream news journalists, forest business magazine reporters also experience the centrifugal effect, although in another way, in which ecologic diversity perspective often becomes a big no-no. One example is the coverage of the plant creeping lady's-tresses (*Goodyera repens*), a species that mainly grows in old, biodiverse rich forests. Since detection of this plant can lead to prohibition of clear-cutting, its occurrence is often linked to conflict and disagreement between stakeholders, such as forestry companies and Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations, which has led to infected and polarised conflicts in many places in Sweden. According to J3, all this makes it very difficult to even mention the creeping lady's-tresses in a neutral way in the journalistic coverage, as just referring to the plant will be seen as partial (cf. the above-presented sensitivity of forest issue discourse). This again puts the journalist in a difficult situation: no matter how they attempt to cover the forest issue, it is seen as controversial, but if they avoid covering it, they will regardless be labelled as a journalist "taking sides".

The centrifugal effect makes it almost impossible for the journalist to stand in the middle and report on the forest issue from a neutral point: the internal polarisation "drags" the journalist to one side even if they try to stay neutral and balanced. The centrifugal effect is experienced in different ways depending on the context, but in most cases, it will involve harsh critique against the journalists, not least in cases of investigative journalism. Consequently, it also affects people participating in media. Taken together, the journalists' aim to cover the forest issue in a truthful, balanced and unbiased manner results adjustments in their role performance, in terms of extra extensive research and double-checking of facts. However, despite this additional careful work, it seems difficult to avoid accusations of partiality and there is therefore the possibility that some journalists will be less willing to cover the forest issue.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this section we discuss the journalists' experiences of professionally handling the polarised forest issue. We begin with the main *challenges* identified in our empirical study (5.1), continuing with what we suggest are the major *consequences* in terms *of implications* for the journalistic roles and role performance (5.2) i.e., how the journalists primarily need to adjust their journalistic roles and navigate their role performance in relation to the "internal" features of the polarised forest issue, and the consequences this may have for forest coverage at large. In the final Section 5.3, we highlight the conclusions that can be drawn from the previous discussion, including limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1. The internal polarisation of the forest issue challenge journalists, roles and role performance

As previous research demonstrates, the forest issue is contested and polarised (Kangas et al., 2018; Jönsson et al., 2021; Mack et al., 2023). In addition, our contribution demonstrates the professional complexity of covering the polarised forest issue, highlighting its internal-polarised features as the key challenge. This internal polarisation is characterised by three challenges: how to manage sensitive terminology, complex relationships of actors and information, and centrifugal effects (Table 4.). Wiik and Johansson (2025) highlight how journalists adapt to the specific context and environment in which they report. This is clearly reflected in our study, where the journalists demonstrate how they have adjusted their journalistic roles in different ways and how they have navigated their role performance in relation to the forest issue. The internal character of the forest issue has several different implications for journalistic roles, and journalistic role performance (discussed in Sections 5.1.1–5.1.3).

5.1.1. Over curating: a time and resource demanding matter

The internal features of the polarisation, taken together, make it more difficult for the journalists to uphold their traditional role as providers of "objective news". Instead, they become curators, in which they adjust their reporting to the media user. In this respect, our results echo Fahy and Nisbet (2011) and Schäfer and Painter (2020)'s findings that environmental journalists have gone from gatekeeping i.e., selecting and disseminating information for the public, to a more curating role, in which they restructure their coverage depending on the media user/target group. In our study covering an issue that, from an outside position, seems like an "internal bubble" of complex conflicts, this adoption of the curating role seems to be accelerated. This is mainly reflected in what specific content the journalist chooses to cover, i.e., the agenda setting role, but can also involve how the forest issue is covered, including selection of angle and sources (Coleman et al., 2009; Djerf-Pierre and Shehata, 2017). Our study confirms, but also develops, Hujanen et al. (2024)'s findings about Nordic environmental journalists, namely that the journalists very much become "over-curators" due to diverging knowledge claims, hidden, blurry relationships and power structures as well as specialised language, often at the micro-level (e.g., awareness of the importance of particular lexical choices, i.e., use of term A instead of term B for describing something). The main incentive to do this is to avoid accusations of making mistakes or advocating for one of two strands of the forest issue.

5.1.2. Balancing sense making and specificity: how to make it correct and objective and yet accessible?

Our study suggests that the roles of the journalists become highly dynamic, in which contradictory demands are supposed to be fulfilled. The journalists are expected to take an educating role, translating and popularising the forest issue to a wider audience (cf. Hujanen et al., 2024; Frig and Penttilä, 2025). Simultaneously, they need to consider that the scientifically complex and sensitive language is highly politicised, and that certain vocabulary or angles are therefore difficult to translate and explain, as they may have very specific meanings in the internal-polarised forest debate. These two roles, which are difficult to fulfil at the same time, in turn demand time, resources, and competence to perform. The journalists perceive that their coverage is differently

Table 4
The internal-polarised character of the forest issue, associated implications for journalistic roles, and journalistic role performance.

The internal-polarised character of the forest issue: three journalistic challenges
Sensitive terminology
Complex relationships of actors and information
Centrifugal effects
Implications for journalistic roles
Over curating (extra adjustment to media-users)
Balancing sense making and specificity
Accusations of partiality and activism
Implications for journalistic role performance
Time and resource demanding work to disseminate and explain coverage
Navigating a scientifically complex and politicised subject
Risk of issue avoidance

received and interpreted by various groups and interests. Reporting becomes difficult considering the power structures between different actors and interests at play in relation to the forest issue. The focus on a few actors adds to the understanding of the internal milieu described by Sténs and Mårald (2020) in their analysis of the echo chambers within forestry. The underlying, often less obvious, relationships between actors may be challenging for journalists to interpret, which then affects their role performance. Also, when journalists' own personal background is entangled in this critique, it becomes even more personal and difficult to handle. In practice, this implies that the journalists need to carefully consider whether a source is associated with one of the strands of the debate, or whether the topic or choice of words or the angle of a specific journalistic piece can be thought to privilege a certain strand of the forest issue. This connects to what Näyhä and Wallius (2024) show in their study about Finnish news media, where the approaches, key actors and discourses on forests diverged depending on the newspaper, and where the different perspectives on forest issues did not overlap. It also connects to the "either or mentality" that Brudermann et al. (2026) find to be frequent in news media in Austria, where different forest management methods are placed in stark contrast to each other, and portrayed as impossible to combine. Our study thus contributes to a greater understanding of why it could be difficult for journalists to balance these sharp contrasts and navigate different views of what should be covered and how media should cover the topic (Näyhä and Wallius, 2024) as a result of the journalists' careful balancing act in describing the forest issue in an accessible, yet scientifically correct way. As they strive to make the forest issue relevant and compelling, yet not politicised, they might increase polarisation where the reporting confirms the media user's belief, rather than opening up and allowing for a societal dialogue on forest topics (Sténs and Mårald, 2020; Näyhä and Wallius, 2024).

5.1.3. *Accusations of partiality and activism: risking issue avoidance*

Despite journalists' attempts to curate and balance their reporting, the internal-polarised character of the forest issue often leads to journalists being criticised by stakeholders and media users for being partial. In line with Keilmann et al. (2025), the journalists in our study negotiate or oppose such accusations, but nevertheless feel a centrifugal effect, in terms of becoming drawn into one of two opposing strands in the debate when they cover the forest issue. Journalists explain accusations of being biased because of existing socio-cultural controversies as well as pressure from economic interests, and the fact that the forest issue seems particularly challenging to cover compared to other issues. Some parallels could be drawn to climate reporting, which is highly politicised and polarised (Chinn et al., 2020). However, the forest issue's internal-polarised character makes it more personal and sensitive compared to climate change.

Consequently, this contributes to the journalists feeling anxious, fearing to be perceived as, and accused of, being biased and partial. In some cases, the critique of their credibility risks discouraging the journalist from being critical in their coverage of the forest issue. A further consequence of the challenges in covering forestry is the risk that journalists avoid reporting about the forest issue at all. The internal polarisation here results in coverage of the forest issue also becoming an inconvenient activity for the journalists, where their role performance risk being criticised by their employers, interest groups in the forest sector, and by media users, and where they experience their legitimacy and their role as journalists being jeopardised.

5.2. *Implications: journalists as co-producers or victims of polarisation?*

In the introduction of this paper, we initiated the discussion about in what contexts journalists could be viewed as "victims" of polarisation and in what contexts they rather become co-producers of the polarisation. Mainstream media are often associated with the latter (Berglez, 2023). This is because media, to attract audiences and generate clicks, tend to emphasise conflicts, and to paint reality in black and white, us versus them, and so forth.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the journalists in our study risk reproducing polarisation, despite their efforts to the contrary. On the other hand, our results, which reveal the internal-polarised character of the forest issue, suggest that journalists are mainly potential "victims" of polarisation. This is related to the fact that the forest issue is, when journalists enter and try to approach the "forest bubble", characterised by sensitive terminology, complex relationships of actors and information, and centrifugal effects. To some extent, they become victims of the fact that there is little common ground between interest groups and actors in the forest sector (cf. Fahy and Nisbet, 2011; Hallberg-Sramek et al., 2020; Sténs and Mårald, 2020; Strauss et al., 2021). Hence, no matter what the journalists do, there will always be a group of media users who will be strongly dissatisfied (Ojala, 2021). Our results show that it is difficult for the journalists to avoid or deviate from the internal-polarised condition and logic of the forest issue.

Our study also indicates that journalists' roles and role performance are affected by the fact that forest and forest management are of interest to many in Sweden, due to ownership of a large proportion of the forest by individuals with different preferences for forestry methods (Hallberg-Sramek et al., 2026), and to the right of access granted to everyone (Sténs and Sandström, 2014). Excessive polarisation is problematic, but debates on forestry are important as the development of forests and forestry are not only technological but also rather socially constructed (Ekström Pigot, 2026). Moreover, there are different scientific lines of argument on the role of the forest in climate mitigation and on which forest values should be prioritised (Mack et al., 2025).

At the same time, traditional media has an important role as an agenda setter and holds a central role in influencing other societal institutions and shaping the public perception of the forest issue (Hjarvard, 2008; Park and Kleinschmit, 2016; Djerf-Pierre and Shehata, 2017). It can penetrate scientifically complex and politically charged jargon and context to avoid a false balance that might occur with a more distanced and neutral reporting (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007). This emphasises and further motivates the need for a diverse and open coverage of forest issues (c.f. Pietarinen et al., 2025), something which is also vital for the development of democratically legitimate forest policy.

5.3. Conclusion

The internal-polarised character of the forest issue challenges journalists which have implications for the journalistic roles and role performance in several ways. The journalists' roles become multifaceted and difficult to combine, which poses challenges to their practical work. They need to navigate challenges and re-negotiate their roles while covering the forest issue. Our study brings attention to the fact that journalism could play an important role in diversifying the debate on the forest issue, for example by scrutinising the internal structures of the forest issue. Such coverage has a transformative potential in that it thereby makes the topic available to democratic discussion about how Swedish forests should be governed and managed in the present time of multiple environmental crises.

Media are often considered to be a producer of black and white and thus polarising world views. This study highlights how journalists, when covering the forest issue, in some contexts, can themselves be seen as victims of polarisation, in ways that are harmful to them, but also to the media users and society as a whole. This as the topics of forest is essential for the examination and discussion of societal problems related to the environmental and climate crises. Media may be a platform for diverse discussions about solutions to the complexities facing forestry. However, the many challenges journalists experience make it a difficult issue to cover and journalism about forestry is often bound to comply with existing power structures and perspectives among actors in the forest sector and the media users. This suggests that there is a divide between how the journalists view their roles and the possibility to fulfil them in their journalistic role performance.

This study covers insights from interviews with 17 Swedish journalists' experiences of covering the Swedish forest issue. Analysis based primarily on interview data can generate coherent accounts of meaning-making by the interviewees; however, it does not, to a considerable extent, reveal potential contradictions between the accounts and the actual, everyday practices of the journalists. In addition, while the data sample was made to ensure satisfactory diversity among the interviewees, the limited sample, typical for qualitative interview studies, could still be seen as a limitation of the study (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). It is important to note that challenges associated with the internal-polarised character of the forest issue take different shapes depending on factors such as the journalists' specialisation and their associated media outlet. However, the focus for this study was to highlight their common challenges in covering the forest issue. There are also other relevant aspects related to the internal-polarised character of the forest issue that fall outside the scope of the study. Future studies could further explore the discursive limitations and openings related to the forest issue, to better understand how journalistic coverage could serve to promote a more open debate beyond the internal-polarisation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kornelia Johansson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Peter Berglez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ann Grubbström:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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