The Alta-controversy - A contested and multi-faceted story.

# Introduction and research questions

The Alta-controversy was a much-discussed civic conflict from 1978 to 1982 revolving around the building of a hydro-powerplant on the mountain plateau of Finnmarksvidda, the submerging of a Sámi village, as well as the loss of pastoral land and the consequent civil unrest. The event is one of the few large-scale public disturbances in Norway’s contemporary history and is often remembered for its large impact on Sámi political rights and society.[[1]](#footnote-1) The controversy divided the local community and mobilized activists locally and nationwide. The controversy reached its climax when a commandeered cruise boat filled with policemen anchored up in the local harbour and forcefully removed several protesters who had chained themselves firmly in the middle of the only access road to the building site of the dam in an event which came to be known as “The battle of Stilla”.

This article will investigate the memory of the Alta-controversy by quantitatively and qualitatively analysing how representations of the event have changed from the time of the event up until the present. By utilizing a corpus consisting of Norwegian newspapers from the period (N ≈ 84 000), this article shows how Natural Language Processing(NLP) can be utilized to gain insights into how single events are represented in posterity and how these representations change over time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We show some possible solutions for researchers on collective memory facing issues with the enormity of the available data. Not having to make any delimitations to our material increases the degree to which we can generalize how the Alta-controversy is being referred to or framed at any given time in newspapers and, therefore, more precisely, say something about the collective memory and its change.

## Earlier research

* Henry Minde
* Samenes Historie
* Ketil sin artikkel I Syn og Segn
* Sigurd sin upubliserte artikkel
* M.m

## Research Questions

This article focuses on the relationship between collective memories, media and, how the collective memory of an event is reflected in newspapers. We believe that this study can contribute to the field of collective memory in two ways. First, our data will address the critiques that studies of collective memory are both reductionist of the complex process which forms memory, and that collective memories are always homogenous within a group.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Secondly, we aim to get theoretical insights into how multiple and conflicting memories of a contemporary conflict evolve and interact in newspapers, and whether the narratives remain divided or are consolidated into one coherent story. The article's research questions are thus: *How is the Alta-controversy made relevant in newspapers after the event? And does this, in turn, consolidate the memory of the event? Are there any thematic, temporal, spatial or editorial patterns?*

# Theory and direction

## How are intra-societal conflicts remembered within collectives?

One of the foundational myths of collective memories is their constituting effect on the collective itself. The original function of collective memories, suggested by the forefather of the concept, Maurice Halbwachs, was to explain the existence of shared identities across individuals with no personal bonds through an imagined common past.[[4]](#footnote-4) Other scholars of memory research, such as Ann Rigney, on the other hand, emphasize that it is the memories’ ability to create debate, discussions and adaptations into new social frameworks as instrumental to their continued remembrance. Rigney suggests that memories only stay alive as long as “people consider it worthwhile to argue about their meaning”[[5]](#footnote-5), and a stable memory will, on the contrary, lead to oblivion in the long run.

While the view on collective memories as fundamentally contestable can give meaning to why the Alta-controversy is remembered so vividly in posterity, it is also contradictive to the original use of the concept as defined by Halbwachs. Rather, this makes the Alta-controversy a disputed memory that continues to divide the population because the controversial issues from the conflict are still seen as both present and unresolved. Other scholars of collective memory, such as Aleida Assmann and Daniel Bar-Tal, argue that memories of intra-societal conflicts are not productive in the long run and can lead to the disintegration of society.[[6]](#footnote-6) In their view, it is not these disputed memories' ability to create a debate that makes them memorable, but it is, what makes them fall into oblivion in the long run due to a sense of “functional forgetfulness” to protect society from its own disputed past.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, it is also possible that the collective memory of the Alta-controversy is shaped by the perceived effects of the controversy onto later society. In this context, it is not the conflict itself, which is the central focus, but rather the enduring consequences and echoes it left behind. If the theoretical implication of narrative theory is taken literarily, it is likely that the *meaning* of the Alta-controversy intertwines with subsequent societal developments and policies. The opening of the Sámi Parliament in 1989, the introduction of the Finnmark Act of 2005, and ongoing conflicts related to Sámi land rights, such as the Fosen controversy, have, in this sense, been crucial in shaping the collective memory of the Alta controversy.

Conflicting perspectives on the past introduce complexity into the process of meaning-making in the present.[[8]](#footnote-8) While the primary criterion for compelling narratives is coherence — avoiding elements or details that contradict the intended meaning — the existence of multiple narratives can render the past as fragmented and seemingly incoherent. This plurality challenges the conventional belief that a singular, unified meaning can be attributed to historical events simultaneously. In this context, if the Alta-controversy has indeed developed meaning as a key event to the development of Sámi rights, the collective memory needs to consolidate the Sámi narrative of the event, emphasizing Sámi presence and perspectives at the expense of other narratives which imply other meanings to posterity.

## The important role of newspapers in remembering intra-societal conflicts

Newspapers play a pivotal role in shaping collective memories. Functioning as gatekeepers in public discourse, newspapers and journalists wield the authority to determine what merits attention and remains relevant. This gatekeeping role empowers them to contribute to novel interpretations and reshape the meaning of the past in response to present circumstances. Barbie Zelizer aptly refers to journalists as "memory agents"[[9]](#footnote-9) within this context, acknowledging their interpretive prowess and deliberate selection in representing the past.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is done by invoking the past as analogies to present situations, as commemorations of the past or as historical context to present situations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Newspapers, therefore, serve as vital arenas where diverse narratives converge and engage in discourse to interpret the past. However, Edy argues that both journalists and audiences seek coherent stories that provide an illusion of objective reality, emphasizing the prevailing idea that only one true narrative can exist at any given moment.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this context, conflicting narratives eventually disappear or become marginal in newspapers. Details of the event that seem to contradict the perceived meaning are either forgotten or adapted to fit the meaning the story. This way, newspaper mentioning’s of past events become condensed and adapted to fit the perceived impact on later society.

However, journalists can also call upon the past to directly explain the news of the present. Zelizer calls this to invoke the *content* of the past to create a narrative that explains the current situation. In this manner, the Alta-controversy transcends its temporal confinements, exerting a tangible impact on the present and, consequently, shaping how the event is perceived in terms of meaning and significance.[[13]](#footnote-13) This direct invocation of the past to elucidate current news, as identified by Zelizer, underscores the influential role journalists play in shaping the narrative surrounding the Alta-controversy and its impact on the present. By weaving the historical content into a narrative that explains contemporary situations, journalists infuse the Alta-controversy with a tangible effect on the present moment. In essence, the interpretations crafted by journalists serve as dynamic bridges, linking the historical with the contemporary and actively influencing the collective understanding of the Alta-controversy in the present-day discourse.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, within the realm of newspapers, these narratives must eventually coalesce to present a cohesive meaning and moral to future societies. Edy argues that both journalists and audiences seek coherent stories that provide an illusion of objective reality, emphasizing the prevailing idea that only one true narrative can exist at any given moment.

One can imagine several roles that newspapers have in the creation of collective memories regarding the Alta-controversy. The most obvious one is as arenas where different and conflicting narratives surface and debate the meaning of the event, and the event remains relevant as an unresolved conflict. However, we can also imagine that one of the conflicting narratives from the Alta-controversy becomes dominating over time, and other views exist only as marginal counter-memories. The newspapers function as arenas where the hegemonic memory of the Alta-controversy is repeated and solidified. A third option is that a new narrative of the conflict is created in posterity, which does not coincide with any of the narratives from the conflict itself. Rather, the meaning of the event is tied to its perceived impact on society, and newspapers serve as spaces where the negotiation and evolution of collective memory take place, shaping the narrative in ways that extend beyond the immediate conflict. By using excerpts from newspapers as our primary data we can explore how these memory arenas are navigated throughout the entire period. Edy’s view on memory making in newspapers serves both as a guide and as a polemic to our research, as presented in this paper.

## How can NLP used on newspapers make the analysis of the collective memory of the Alta-controversy more representative?

Wulf Kansteiner states that identical interpretations of the past within a group are one of the foundational myths of the field of Collective memory.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, the likelihood of a completely uniform view of the past within a group decreases as the size of the group increases.[[16]](#footnote-16) A monolithic view of the past events within large communities, like in our case, Norway, is therefore unlikely if we follow Kansteiner. The fact that we are dealing with the memory of a conflict where there still are numerous eyewitnesses further decreases this likelihood.[[17]](#footnote-17) These insights point to a need for methods that can illuminate multiple perspectives.

NLP is such an approach. Natural language processing relies on distributional semantics proposed by Firth and Harris.[[18]](#footnote-18) Within this framework, it is assumed that one can infer the meaning from the relationship between words. These relationships are described mathematically. Modern NLP often relies on probabilistic models of a large corpus – like the Norwegian Colossus corpus or all the text on Wikipedia, for example. An example of one such model is gpt-3.5, which is familiar to us through ChatGPT.

These methods, applied to newspapers can illustrate how the Alta-controversy is remembered in various and conflicting ways within Norway. By using a corpus of Norwegian newspapers from the event to the present, it is possible to identify the different voices and modes of interpretation which exist simultaneously in the newspaper. We will categorize mentions of the Alta-controversy in the corpus according to the context around it. By measuring the relative size of these categories, e.g., a Sámi context, an environmental context, issues related to law and order, etc., it is possible to measure the relationships and distributions at any given time after the conflict. This approach will, therefore, make the study more representative of the variations which exist within the collective memory than if we were focusing on a smaller selection of sources.

NLP can also counteract reductionist views of the processes of shaping collective memories by elaborating how representations of the event change over time. The methods can, be helpful in dissecting the complexity of the collective memory formation process by analysing how the Alta-controversy is contextualized differently at different times and by different newspapers. This way, we will be able to gain a better understanding of the creation of memory and its maintenance. Edy suggests that different narratives of conflicts can only for a limited time coexist. Given time, these stories become simplified and condensed due to the narrative impulse of seeking a meaning of the past and subsequently making the story of the Alta-controversy fit this meaning.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Expanding our exploration, NLP analyses of newspapers can offer insights into *how* meaning is attributed to past events and, in this sense, become collective memories that shape our understanding of the past and its relation to the present. NLP becomes a powerful tool for dissecting the processes by which the Alta-controversy is assigned significance in different situations across time. Subsequently, we will delve qualitatively into the material, tracking these changes to concrete situations and events where the Alta controversy is made relevant.

# Methods

In this study we have leveraged new advances in artificial intelligence to our advantage. In this section we will avoid covering the most technical aspects, while presenting the process in the order that it was conducted in. All the code used will be available on GitHub.

According to “lov om avleveringsplikt” for all documents that are made publicly available in Norway a copy must be sent to the Norwegian national library (NB).[[20]](#footnote-20) This has resulted in an enormous collection of among other things, newspapers. The newspapers have in turn been made available digitally for research purposes. The newspapers have been scanned and processed for machine reading by the national library. We have utilized NBs publicly available API to create our corpus for this study.[[21]](#footnote-21) An API is the way your computer talks to a computer in another location, or how a program talks to another program on your computer.

To create our corpus, we set out to craft a search strategy which would capture as much as possible of what was written about the Alta-controversy.[[22]](#footnote-22) After many iterations, we opted for a strategy that matches terminology only used in relation to the Alta-controversy, like “Demonstrantene i Alta”.[[23]](#footnote-23) An unresolved problem is the quality of the scanned newspapers from NB. While in general excellent, we saw that in some cases, some letters are not properly transcribed.[[24]](#footnote-24) Another problem is that although we have a quite broad search strategy, some cases discussing the Alta-Controversy have certainly been left out. We do of course, not know which ones this is, else we had included them. We accounted for the two most common forms of written Norwegian language, Bokmål and Nynorsk. Sadly, we were not able to include Sámi newspapers written in Sámi, due to the nature of the language models we are using, which are made for the North Germanic languages. The newspapers in question are: “Sámi Áigi”, “Min Áigi”, “Ávvir” and “Áššu”. In cases where these newspapers have published text in Norwegian, it is included.

After collecting all the newspapers matching our criteria, we wanted to extract text related to the Alta-controversy. To do this, we used NBs concordance search.[[25]](#footnote-25) This tool lets you take a word and extract n words before and after the same word. For example, if we look up “Alta-saken”, we will get all strings containing “Alta-saken”. Here is an example of such a string, the words gathered from the concordance search are in italics, and the search term is in bold: “*Og som et PR-trlck i* **Alta-saken** *er dette vel i og for seg greit nok . Men hvis denne sultestreiken skal ha noe mer alvorlig”*. After some data cleaning, we ended up with 74182 unique strings of words. We ended up removing a lot of the announcements for television programs as they took up disproportionate amounts of space from 1985 and onwards. Some concordances are also quotes and widely circulated reports from news agencies, this was not excluded from our analysis. In the end, we have 83266 strings which make up our corpus. In addition to the strings, our data consists of publication day, place, and newspaper. Many of the publication places we had to add in manually.

In essence, our approach to the historical material is to utilize it primarily as remains.[[26]](#footnote-26) We are trying to detect changes in how the Alta-controversy has been talked about in the Norwegian press. One traditional way of doing this kind of quantitative analysis could be to manually read and label the data and then summarize the labels. Another way could be to investigate collocations and to do n-gram and colocation analysis.[[27]](#footnote-27) Our approach tries to account for more of the context and the multi-faceted characteristics of language. Recent technical advances have made it possible to approach larger amounts of text and analyse them without the need for supercomputers.

Our computational approach utilizes an *encoder-only transformer model*.[[28]](#footnote-28) In 2021 the first Norwegian transformer model appeared, Nbert.[[29]](#footnote-29) A transformer model is a large language model (LLM), which differs from earlier LLMs mostly by being cheaper to make – the architecture of earlier language models was prohibitively expensive. NBert is trained on data from the Norwegian colossal corpus, which includes large swaths of digitized Norwegian text from books, Wikipedia, newspapers and parliamentary speeches. In practice, it means that the model has been trained on newspapers with similar contexts to our corpus, and similar OCR errors as our corpus. This does, however create some peculiarities. As we opted for a combined approach, we discovered that some of the excerpts which only differed in slight formatting, like a missing coma or a dash, had some impact on how the model handled them. In these language models there are thus some parts of the model which do not correspond well to our perception of meaning.

Although there exist newer BERT models, with better benchmarks for Norwegian, we have opted not to use them, as no specialized models have been trained on them.[[30]](#footnote-30) The specialized language model we are using is ScandiNLI.[[31]](#footnote-31) ScandiNLI is a zero-shot classification model, which means that the model is able to classify text in accordance with labels that we have defined.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The models have been evaluated for accuracy on standardized benchmarks.[[33]](#footnote-33) ScandiNLI achieves an accuracy of 80.36% on these tests. It is worth mentioning that our configuration of the model returns a score between 1 and 0 for every label and sentence, where 1 indicates a 100% probability of the sentence matching the label. Mislabelling would typically present itself as the model providing a somewhat higher or lower number than our own assessment. Since we are trying to detect trends in this paper, this is a manageable problem. It should also be mentioned that the benchmark itself was machine-translated into Norwegian, making it a suboptimal indicator. We did, however develop a tool to inspect peculiarities in our data to combat some of these errors.

We opted for a somewhat tedious approach to verify the quality of our labels. We took 50 randomly selected sentences from our corpus and tested our labels on these sentences. We then modified the labels that seemed not to work as intended and reran the model with new labels. We found that changing the labels slightly often solved the worst cases of mislabelling. This process combines deductive and inductive approaches in a novel way. The approach has some promise but could certainly benefit further work. This approach also enabled some discoveries. We wanted every sentence to have at least one label which was above 0.5. This was, unfortunately, not economically feasible in all cases. We thus managed to create some new ones as we went along, and this yielded some interesting perspectives. We also saw that the model was surprisingly able to infer contexts in many cases, although not all.

In the end, we ended up with 61 labels that capture different aspects of the Alta-controversy. It was often the case that our text strings were about several things at once.  An important label for this analysis is the labels “samesaken” and the label “Samiske særrettigheter”. “Samesaken” had a high score when something related to the Sámi was discussed, but “Samiske særrettigheter” scored much higher when people thought that the Sámi were granted special privileges. We have used the average yearly scores for different labels to compute trends. To look closer into the more interesting developments, we also made a tool that enabled us to extract the sentences that were responsible for a trend. This led to many surprises and reconsiderations. This combined analysis provided illuminating context for some of the spikes in the trend lines. Even though it was the graveyard of many beloved hypotheses. Additionally, it was relevant to pinpoint the exact point where the discourse seemed to pivot.

Our work process and analysis have primarily been written and conducted in R. All the data was collected through the open API from NB. This API had some quirks that we were unable to fully grasp, but it seemed fine in the end. We did, however have to use Python to set up and run the ScandiNLI Model. The testing of the labels was done in google Collab, but the final analysis was done over a couple of days locally on a M1max MacBook.

Reliability concerns that one is usually faced with when labelling datasets is eliminated by using machine labelling. The computer computes the same result every time. The larger question remains, as always, the validity concerns. First, the inner workings of AI models like BERT have been somewhat mysterious to us, as the computations are too large and complex for a human to grasp. A recent paper by Anthropic showed that it is possible to interpret parts of these models mechanistically, to explore the different relationships between different words and phrases.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is, however too recent for us to be able to apply it in this context. Secondly, our corpus in this study and the corpus used to train the Norwegian language models is not a corpus without quirks. Manual inspections were required in many cases, and we are certain that further investments in enhancing the Norwegian National Library’s digitized data would be wise and beneficial for everyone using it.

Our methodology yields useful results, but this novel approach would benefit from more iterative work. There is still room for improvement in almost every aspect, some would be quite costly, but also very beneficial – others will take more iterations. We thus present a novel methodology, but as with anything truly novel it is also yet to be discovered what the actual limitations and biggest problems are.

# Analysis, A periodization and a great many figures

## The overall quantitative trend

A graph with blue lines

Description automatically generated

*Figure 1: Her is an overview of total number of times the Alta-controversy has been mentioned each year from 1983 until 2023. Note: 2023 was not fully available to us.*

Figure 1 also include synonyms, as mentioned in the methods part, excluding the TV guide sections. While the figure demonstrates that the Alta-controversy is repeatedly considered relevant in posterity, it does not illuminate in which situations the event is considered relevant, nor does it show what aspects of the conflict are illuminated, or indeed how the conflict was discussed. We have divided the period of interest into several sub-periods to help the analysis of these trends along. It is important to keep in mind that these aggregated numbers obfuscate the highly stochastic nature of our data. Some days the Alta-controversy is talked about everywhere, other days – nowhere.

## The initial years: Conflicting narratives and declining interest (1983-1986)

As illustrated by Figure 1, the first four years after the conflict are marked by a high number of references to the Alta-controversy, but at the same time, a rapid decline in interest. Our number of yearly datapoints drop from above 2000 hits in 1983 to around 600 hits in 1986.

A graph of different colored lines

Description automatically generated

*Figure 2 illustrates that newspapers favoured framings that opposed the building of the dam, both during the conflict and in the immediate aftermath.*

Figure 2 illustrates various frames of the Alta controversy in newspapers during and after the conflict, with each category containing different several labels associated with the narrative framing. The category “Pro protestor” reflects framings of the Alta-controversy that are sympathetic to the protesters and negative to the authorities' treatment of the protesters. “Pro government”, on the other hand, contains references that support the authorities' efforts to remove protesters to complete the dam, and consider civil disobedience illegitimate. “Environmentalist aspects” contain framings of the conflict that emphasize that the event was an environmentalist struggle and felt that the consequences of the damming were insufficiently investigated, while the “Pro building of the dam”-category, on the other hand, underscores the necessity of the damming to secure power and economic development. The last label, “Sámi aspects”, relates the Alta-controversy to the Sámi minority and their struggle for rights.

Furthermore, figure 2 indicates that large shifts in how newspapers framed the Alta-controversy happened *during* the event and not in the initial period after. In particular, the emergence of the Sámi perspective co-occurred with a sharp decline in references to the Alta-controversy that focused on the necessity of the damming, but also the environmental aspects. Since we have operated with highly aggregated “super-categories” containing several different labels a closer look was warranted.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 1983 | Rettsak | Overdrevet maktbruk av myndigheter og politi | Manglende utredning om konsekvenser |
| 1984 | Overdrevet maktbruk av myndigheter og politi | Manglende utredning om konsekvenser | Rettsak |
| 1985 | Overdrevet maktbruk av myndigheter og politi | Manglende utredning om konsekvenser | utsatt og usikkerhet |
| 1986 | Manglende utredning om konsekvenser | overdrevet maktbruk av myndigheter og politi | Skeptisk til ulydighet |

*Table 1 illustrates which labels were the most associated with the Alta-controversy during these first four years.*

These tables enable us to see which of our fifty or, so labels were describing some characteristics on the sentences across different years. That “rettsak” is the top-scoring label in this period can be explained by the fact that there were several trials in 1983 that were related to the Alta-controversy. It is also a strong indication that this methodology can detect some larger trends. The most prominent of these was the trial against the four leaders of the “Folkeaksjonen”, where they were they condemned for insurrection.

While the trials found the members and leaders of “Folkeaksjonen” guilty of insurrection, we find no indication that these convictions changed the narrative framing of the Alta-controversy in the newspapers. While Edy calls trials, commissions, and policy changes “redressive acts” where the political elite attempts to give new meanings to conflicts, these often fail for several reasons.[[35]](#footnote-35) If trials are to be successful in given new meaning to the conflicts, this depends on the legitimacy of the court. While the court system in Norway generally enjoys great trust in the population, it appears that the prosecution of Folkeaksjonen as *insurrection* appeared exaggerated, considering the non-violent nature of the protests. This is illustrated in newspapers by putting the indictment in quotation marks and creating allegories to the previous time which the paragraph was used during the inter-war period on labour union leaders, as these individuals emerged as prominent politicians after the Second World War.[[36]](#footnote-36) In this sense, the leaders of “Folkeaksjonen” are framed as morally superior to the authorities and ahead of their time, while the authorities, on the contrary, seem reactionary, and the verdict is interpreted as another example of the use of excessive force. If trials are “redressive acts” as Edy claims, in the case of the Alta-controversy, not only did it fail establishing the authority’s narrative of the event, but the trials additionally had a contra productive effect, further undermining their view of the event. This is furthermore reflected by the labels shown in table 1, which emphasize the excessiveness of the authorities. It also calls into question the political elites’ ability to reframe the memory of events as they intended.

Another event that had the potential to significantly alter the framing of the Alta-controversy was the Sámi Commission report of 1984.[[37]](#footnote-37) This commission was created as a response to the hunger strikes of 1979 to investigate the question of Sámi's rights. However, the report was not followed by the Sámi perspective becoming the leading frame of interpretation of the Alta-controversy in the years following the event. While there was a small rise in the Sámi perspective framings in 1984, as seen in Figure 2, a closer inspection showed that these were mostly related to the screening of a Sámi documentary the same year.[[38]](#footnote-38) While the proposition of the committee included major expansions for Sámi political and juridical rights, such as the inclusion of the Sámi minority in the constitution and the establishment of a Sámi Parliament, it was not followed by a major debate on the issue of Sámi rights.[[39]](#footnote-39) This can be explained by the fact that the report merely contained propositions which had to be elaborated to actual laws and policies, and then be passed on by the parliament. In this sense, the uncertainty of the *outcome* of these propositions could be the reason that the commission report did not make Sámi framings the main meaning of the Alta-controversy.

Another contributing explanation of the lack of attention to the 1984 commission report was that it sparked little debate in the newspapers *whether* the Sámi population should have distinct rights vis-à-vis Greater Society. Upon reviewing the newspaper references, the propositions by the commission are seen as natural and undisputed steps towards Sámi minority inclusion. While our data show that the commission report did *not* change the meaning of the Alta-controversy into becoming primarily a Sámi event, the Alta-controversy had in the end led to the naturalization of the demand for Sámi rights. This is also indicated by figure 3, where we can see a large majority of framings that *support* the necessity of Sámi rights versus an apprehension of them as being discriminatory towards the majority. Additionally, figure 3 also demonstrates that both these framings were dropping drastically in these initial years, which further indicates that these rights were not a disputed topic but were seen as a matter of course within a few years after the Alta-controversy.

A screen shot of a graph

Description automatically generated

*Figure 3: This figure shows the development of two labels capturing different perspectives on Sámi rights.*

The lack of newsworthiness of the Alta-controversy in its immediate aftermath also changed the way journalists reported on the event. As no new development regarding the Alta-controversy surfaced or was seen as relevant, the style of writing in the newspapers became more interpretive, focusing on understanding why the seemingly common building of a hydro-powerplant could unleash the largest civil unrest in Norway after the Second World War. The main scapegoat for the escalation of the conflict was the government, as demonstrated by Table 1, both through blaming the authorities for the use of excessive force, but also by undermining the surveys made by the authorities before the plans were approved.

In this sense, finding an explanation as to *why* the conflict had escalated in such an unexpected and dramatic manner became more important than designating the meaning or effects of the Alta-controversy. As demonstrated by figure 2, while the *proportional* relationship between each of the framings remained similar in the initial years, the number of references to all the various framings dropped. This can indicate that the references to the Alta-controversy in newspapers attempted to navigate between the different narratives without creating new debate. This drop in conflict level is also illustrated by Figure 3, which illustrates a sharp decline in both the view that the Sámi rights were threatened and that they were discriminatory to the majority. This way, contradictive narratives can coexist.

While the framings of the Alta-controversy changed during the conflict, there were no major changes of these framings in the immediate aftermath of the event. Although the initial years saw a high number of references to the event, no new information emerged that was deemed relevant to the narrative of the Alta controversy. This led to framings that were negative to the damming, and the government’s handling of the conflict continued to be the most reflected in the newspapers, but also, the general interest and sense of relevancy of the event declined. Additionally, the public officials lost their ability to define the content and issues at stake once the conflict had ended, and the media turned their attention to eyewitnesses of the event.

## New relevancy and revisions of the narrative: 1987-2005

In 1987 we see another peak in Figure 1. While this is the year that the dam was opened, this event was shadowed by statements from the state secretary of the Ministry of Oil and Petroleum in the current Labour Government, Anne Marie Nystad. Nystad stated that the development of the Alta dam would likely not have been implemented if proposed today, due to a lower-than-expected need for power in the region. The comments of Nystad created major debate regarding the necessity of the damming, and her statement was largely interpreted as a confession by current the Labour government that the Alta-dam had been wrongfully implemented by the former Labour Party government a few years earlier. These comments were contrasted with statements from former members of the Labour Party government, such as former ministers of Oil and Petroleum Bjartmar Gjerde and Arvid Johanson, where Johanson stated: “There are few cases where I am as certain that we did the right thing as the Alta-case”.[[40]](#footnote-40)

While the statements of Nystad had the potential to *reduce* the responsibility of the Labour Party of the Alta-controversy by blaming wrongful projections that were beyond the Party's responsibility, and at the same time distancing the institution from the Labour Party ministers who had sponsored the construction, much indicate that these statements further implicated the Labour Party. It was on the other hand seen as a confession to the Labour Party's role in carrying out the dam on an unjustified basis. The statements of the current leader of the Labour Party, Gro Harlem Brundtland, in 1990, further supported this view as the Labour Party as an institution being responsible of the conflict, as Brundtland had been Ministry of Environmentalism in the panning-phase of the damming, and became Prime minister when Oddvar Nordli resigned in 1981, during the midst of the conflict. When asked whether she believed the Alta-damming was necessary, she replied:

*"If one looks back at the 70s and 80s, the expectations and belief that a very extensive power development was necessary were not entirely justified. It has simply been shown that energy forecasts were lower. However, that is something one can say in hindsight, knowing how the developments unfolded later in the 80s."[[41]](#footnote-41)*

While also blaming faulty projections of the future energy requirements, the newspapers interpreted this as an admittance to guilt for the Labour Party carrying out the damming and thereby creating the conflict without grounds. Additionally, the newspapers in 1987 underscored that there *had* existed projections that contradicted the urgent necessity of the damming during the Alta-controversy, but that the government had refused these as the construction of the dam had become a matter of prestige for the Labour Government. Brundtland's responsibility during the Alta-controversy and her current role as leader of the Labour Party and soon-to-be prime minister again from 1990-1996 further institutionalized the responsibility of the Labour Party.

While Edy states that public officials who retain their position have the power to sponsor their narrative of the past in the aftermath, the Alta-controversy illustrates there is no guarantee for this narrative being accepted by the newspapers.[[42]](#footnote-42) Even when Labour officials attempted to mitigate this responsibility by admitting an unfortunate outcome of the Alta-controversy, their attempts to distance themselves from the question of guilt were, on the other hand, interpreted as a confession.

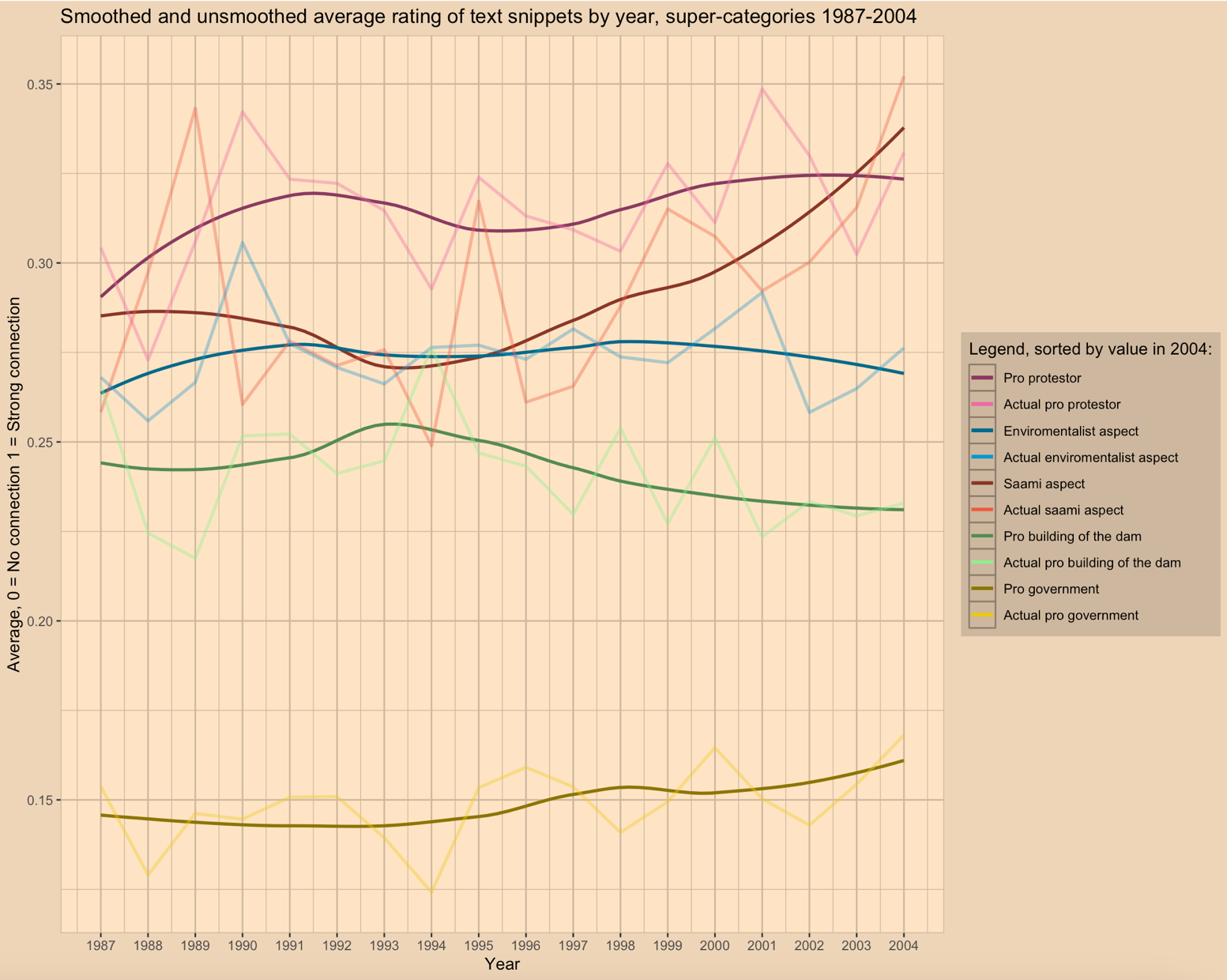


Figure 4 shows an increase in framings of the Alta-Controversy as a Sámi issue.

This institutionalizing of the guilt to the Labour Party is contributary to the framing of “Pro-construction” remains the dominant frame of interpretation for most of the period (figure 4). The plot has several peaks in the period and increases throughout the period: the 1987 peak is related to the statements of Nystad. One can also make note of the “pro-construction” framing rising due to the debate that followed the statements. The 1990 peak is related to the Statements of Brundtland. In 1991, at the 10-year commemoration of the “Battle of Stilla”[[43]](#footnote-43) in Alta, the director of the NVE stated that “We would have managed without Alta-dam.”, and subsequently proposed energy efficiency measures as an alternative to future build-outs.[[44]](#footnote-44) In 1994, during the referendum on Norwegian EU membership, Brundtland’s advocacy for joining the union was questioned as another case of misinformation regarding the circumstances.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The 1995 peak is related to several feature articles written about then prime minister Brundtland meeting former protester Inger Anne Sara Gaup, who was one of 15 Sámi women who occupied the offices of Brundtland during the Alta-controversy. Here, Brundtland is confronted with her own responsibilities for the damming as Minister of Environment during the planning of the construction.[[46]](#footnote-46) In 1997, then prime minister of the Labour Party Thorbjørn Jagland compared the commotion surrounding the planned gas powerplant with the Alta-controversy, declaring, “The situation of the Alta-protests was not good. We need therefore to do everything possible to avoid manoeuvring into a similar situation where the circumstance has not been mapped out sufficiently”.[[47]](#footnote-47) The 2001 peak is related to the 20-year commemoration of the Battle of Stilla, and Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg of the Labour Party declares in the new year's speech that “the period of large-scale hydropower plant developments are over” and that “The Alta-controversy marked the beginning of the end”.[[48]](#footnote-48)

All these events are examples of where the Alta-controversy were made relevant to not just Brundtland, but all leaders of the Labour Party in posterity when confronted with cases which contained the elements of environmentalism and possible conflict. Zelizer calls this to “invoke the past through its form”, where past events are compared to the present through an allegory.[[49]](#footnote-49) As the Labour Party itself was implicated in the Alta-controversy, changes of leadership made no difference to the institution's responsibility in the conflict. To Brundtland, however, the Alta-controversy became an allegory to her ability to make *any* sort of mistake.

## The Sámi framings

The chart in Figure 4 shows that towards the end of the period, the Sámi framing became the primary reference point for the Alta-controversy. It is likely that the rise is related to the first peak in the period, which coincides with the opening of the Sámi parliament in 1989. Unlike the Sámi Commission report of 1984, this event became relevant in relation to the Alta-controversy. In newspaper articles on the event, the Alta-controversy is mentioned as the background of the Sámi Parliament, mainly due to the Sámi artist Mari Boine dedicating a joik[[50]](#footnote-50) to the hunger strikers of 1979.[[51]](#footnote-51) Most of the newspaper articles paint a harmonic picture of the opening by the King, but some debate *within* the Sámi community regarding the Sámi Parliament is also mentioned.[[52]](#footnote-52) Additionally, a few papers make a point of the fact that Sámi activists who had performed the hunger strike was not invited to the event. Looking back at Figure 3, we can nonetheless see that the proportion of the discussion of the Alta-Controversy which was on Sámi rights hit a low point during this period, which indicates that opening was, in general, not seen as controversial and that the issue of Sámi rights had been further normalized since the commission report of 1984.[[53]](#footnote-53) The opening of the Sámi parliament, therefore, largely silenced both those who demanded Sámi political rights, but also those who argued that such rights were to be considered as granting exclusive privileges to the Sami.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Figure 4 also demonstrates that 1995 and 1999 were peak years for Sámi framings of the Alta-controversy. The high mentioning’s in 1995 are mainly related to the already mentioned visit of Brundtland at the Sámi Parliament, where she meets with former Sámi activist Gaup. Additionally, a radio documentary about Niilas Somby, one of the bridge saboteurs of 1982, also creates some references to a Sámi framing of the Alta-controversy. The 1999 high point is, on the other hand, mainly a commemoration of the Alta-controversy, both in terms of marking 20 years since the hunger strikes and illuminating it as one of the major events of the 20th century related to the new millennium. These commemorations focused on the Sámi relevancy of the event, by emphasizing that the Alta-controversy resulted in new attention on Sámi rights and the Sámi parliament.[[55]](#footnote-55) The 2001 commemoration of the Battle of Stilla similarly emphasize the Sámi presence in these demonstrations, compared to the already mentioned 1991 commemoration, which focused on the environmentalist perspective of Folkeaksjonen, and the confession that the damming was unnecessary from the director of the NVE. Figure 4 shows an increase in Sámi framings of the event during this period, while environmentalist aspects decrease. This can partially be explained by the that the details of the Alta-controversy are gradually being adapted to the role of beginning of a Sámi revitalization, whilst the environmental outcome of the event is somewhat less apparent.

A relevant question to ask in this context is whether the establishing of Sámi rights can be understood in terms of what Edy calls a “redressive ritual”, where the political elite retrospectively attempt to change the narrative of the Alta-controversy and their role in it, by capitalizing on the current development of Sámi rights.[[56]](#footnote-56) In this sense, one might imagine that the Labour Party attempted to frame themselves as the *initiators* of the Sámi rights and thereby counter their status as “the wrong makers of the Alta-controversy”.

On the contrary, references to important milestones in the development of Sámi rights do mainly not invoke the Alta-controversy. For example, Brundtland’s visit to the Sámi parliament in 1995 in relation to the second report of the Sámi commission regarding land rights, does not explicitly see this report as deriving from the Alta-controversy. Similarly, when the report was released in 1997, there were few explicit references to the Alta-controversy in the newspapers. The same year, during the opening of the Sámi Parliament, the King gave a long-awaited apology for the assimilation policy on behalf of the state. Despite two major developments on Sámi rights this year, 1997 is one of the years when the Alta-controversy is *least* framed in a Sámi context. Even in the year of the opening of the Sámi Parliament, a minority of reports referring to the opening relate it to the Alta-controversy. This may indicate that the Alta-controversy is seldom made relevant to the development of Sámi rights as they happen, but rather in posterity, such as the commemorations of 1999 and 2001. A far more dominant framing of the Sámi-rights question was often the Norwegianization policy.[[57]](#footnote-57) While omitting the Alta-controversy can be an example of tacit knowledge and avoiding something self-evident, newspapers may also have a limited ability to historically contextualize current events with the past as they play out. Many of these explanations first become evident to the press in the aftermath. Allegories and similarities with situations in the present are on the other hand more visible and evident, as illustrated by the repeated reference to the Alta-controversy when the Labour Party and Brundtland face similar challenges.

During the last part of the period, the Sámi relation becomes the most dominant way to frame the Alta-controversy, as demonstrated by Figure 4 when it overtakes “Pro-demonstrates”. One possible explanation for this is the rise of competing perspectives on Sámi rights, as illustrated by Figure 3. This is likely due to the debate related to the second Sámi Commission on land rights. Some newspaper articles are related to such conflicts, but far from all. During the years 2003 and 2004, when the increase in Sámi framings happened, it is however hard to pinpoint specific events which make the Sámi framing of the Alta-controversy particularly relevant. Rather, we can see a wide range of feature articles about the event which have a commemorative approach to the event, and these emphasize the Sámi relevancy of the event. It is also important to note that the *absolute* frequency of references to the Alta-controversy drops these years, as illustrated by Figure 1. An explanation can therefore be that when the overall references to the Alta-controversy drop, only the essential of the conflict is remembered, as the least common multiple of representations of the Alta-controversy. In this period the effects of the Alta-controversy on the development of Sámi rights become evident, which can be explanatory for this general increase in Sámi framings of the event. This can also be related to several documentaries which were screened in Norwegian Broadcasting during the 1990s. In particular, the documentary “The Alta-controversy - A Game of Power and Despair” emphasizes the positive Sámi effects of the Alta-controversy, while also underscoring the mistakes made by the government. In this sense, the documentary creates new meaning from what was increasingly being referred to as an apparently meaningless and unnecessary event.

Asdal, Kristin. "Vi Kunne Ha Klart Oss Uten Alta-Utbygginga." *Klassekampen* (Norge;Oslo;;Oslo;;;;), 1991-07-06 1991. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_klassekampen_null_null_19910706_22_152_1>.

Assmann, Aleida. "Canon and Archive." Medien Und Kulturelle Erinnerung, 97-107. BERLIN 30: BERLIN 30: Walter De Gruyter, 2008.

———. "Memory, Individual and Collective." Oxford Handbooks of Political Science: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Bar-Tal, Daniel. *Intractable Conflicts : Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Berger, Mark S. "Miljø-Bispen Jubler." *Bergensavisen* (Bergen), 1997-05-10 1997. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_bergensavisen_null_null_19970510_71_123_1>.

Edy, Jill. *Troubled Pasts: News and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest.* Temple University Press, 2006.

Enoksen, Ragnhild. "Sultestreiken Hjalp." *Nordlys* (Tromsø), 1989-10-11 1989. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_nordlys_null_null_19891011_88_235_1>.

Granviken, Simen. "Adresseavisen 2001.01.13." *Adresseavisen* (Trondheim), 2001-01-13 2001. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_adresseavisen_null_null_20010113_235_11_1>.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory.* New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

Kansteiner, Wulf. "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies." *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002).

NTB. "Altautbyggingen Et Feilgrep?" *Helgeland Arbeiderblad* (Norge;Nordland;;Vefsn;;;;), 1987-04-25 1987. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_helgelandarbeiderblad_null_null_19870425_58_94_1>.

———. "Stormen I Stilla." *Namdalsavisa* (Namsos), 1999-12-10 1999. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_namdalsavisa_null_null_19991210_82_286_1>.

Olick, Jeffrey K., and Joyce Robbins. "Social Memory Studies from Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998).

Rigney, Ann. "The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts between

Monumentality and Morphing." In *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara Young. Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008.

Sætra, Gunnar. "Statsminister Og Okkupant Takket for Sist." *Finnmarken* (Vadsø), 1995-02-22 1995. <https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digavis_finnmarken_null_null_19950222_96_45_1>.

Schwartz, Barry. "Culture and Collective Memory: Comparative Perspectives." In *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by L. Grindstaff, Hall, J. R., & Lo, 643-52: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010.

Zelizer, Barbie. "Journalism’s Memory Work." In *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara Young. Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008.

1. Sælthun 2024 – FORTHCOMING FOR SURE! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an introduction to NLP, see: Jurafsky & Martin 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002); Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998); Barry Schwartz, "Culture and collective memory: Comparative perspectives," in *Handbook of cultural sociology*, ed. L. Grindstaff, Hall, J. R., & Lo (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Maurice Halbwachs, *The collective memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ann Rigney, "The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between

   Monumentality and Morphing," in *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young (Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," Oxford Handbooks of Political Science (Oxford University Press, 2006); Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable conflicts : socio-psychological foundations and dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," Medien und Kulturelle Erinnerung (BERLIN 30: BERLIN 30: Walter De Gruyter, 2008). ALSO: Nietzsche say this!! [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. REFERANSE MANGLER [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Barbie Zelizer, "Journalism’s Memory Work," in *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young (Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Edy --- legg inn: Rise of interpretive journalism: Edy s 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jill Edy, *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest* (Temple University Press, 2006); Zelizer, "Journalism’s Memory Work." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. REFERANSE [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Journalism as commemoration, analogies and contexts: Edy s102 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zelizer, "Journalism’s Memory Work." [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies." [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. SOURCCE [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Firth and Harris [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Edy, *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pliktavleveringslova – avlvl 1989: §4 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. DH-lab at the National Library of Norway 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The search strategy is attached as an Appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “The protestors in Alta” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This was also a problem for the researchers creating the first Norwegian transformer model, see: Kummervold 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the documentation for the API for more details of its inner workings: NB 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rüsen 2017:134; Tjelmeland 2004: 121-123 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Johnsen 2021; Lie et. al. 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Vaswani et. al. 2017; Devlin et. al. 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Kummervold 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Samuel 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Nielsen 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Yin 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Williams et al. 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Antropic 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Edy, *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Nordlys, Dagbladet [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. NOU 1984:18: Om samens rettstilling [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See for example: NEWSPAPER REFERENCE [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Our corpus is not made to detect such a debate. We still assumed that it would “bleed over” to our data as we were of the initial impression that these two cases were strongly connected, also in mainstream media. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. NTB, "Altautbyggingen et feilgrep?," *Helgeland Arbeiderblad* (Norge;Nordland;;Vefsn;;;;), 1987-04-25 1987, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_helgelandarbeiderblad\_null\_null\_19870425\_58\_94\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. NRK [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Edy, *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The “Battle of Stilla” was when the police arrested most of the protestors blocking the access road to the construction site of the dam. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Kristin Asdal, "Vi kunne ha klart oss uten Alta-utbygginga," *Klassekampen* (Norge;Oslo;;Oslo;;;;), 1991-07-06 1991, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_klassekampen\_null\_null\_19910706\_22\_152\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. SOURCE NEEDED [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Gunnar Sætra, "Statsminister og okkupant takket for sist," *Finnmarken* (Vadsø), 1995-02-22 1995, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_finnmarken\_null\_null\_19950222\_96\_45\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Mark S. Berger, "Miljø-bispen jubler," *Bergensavisen* (Bergen), 1997-05-10 1997, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_bergensavisen\_null\_null\_19970510\_71\_123\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Simen Granviken, "Adresseavisen 2001.01.13," *Adresseavisen* (Trondheim), 2001-01-13 2001, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_adresseavisen\_null\_null\_20010113\_235\_11\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Zelizer, "Journalism’s Memory Work." [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Traditional Sámi vocal music. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. As earlier we assume that a larger debate would bleed over in our corpus during this period, which is only targeted at the Alta-controversy. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ragnhild Enoksen, "Sultestreiken hjalp," *Nordlys* (Tromsø), 1989-10-11 1989, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_nordlys\_null\_null\_19891011\_88\_235\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. NTB, "Stormen i Stilla," *Namdalsavisa* (Namsos), 1999-12-10 1999, https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\_digavis\_namdalsavisa\_null\_null\_19991210\_82\_286\_1. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Edy, *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Sannhets og forsoningskommisjonen? [↑](#footnote-ref-57)