



Alternative Media in European Contexts

Theoretical Cornerstones, Methodological Challenges, and Systemic Conditions

Edited by Eva Mayerhöffer · Miriam Kroman Brems
Tine Ustad Figenschou · Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk

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Alternative Media in European Contexts

“This volume enriches the field of alternative media studies by bringing together theoretically sophisticated and methodologically rigorous perspectives from crucial European scholars who have their collective fingers on the pulse of this multidisciplinary field. Mayerhöffer, Brems, Figenschou, Ihlebæk and their contributors demonstrate how much alternative media scholarship has matured by investigating a fuller range of projects, participants, and their systemic influences.”

— Jennifer Rauch, Linfield University, U.S., Professor of Journalism and Media Studies and author of *Resisting the News: Engaged Audiences, Alternative Media, and Popular Critique of Journalism* and co-editor (with Stephen Cushion) of the *Routledge Handbook of Alternative and Participatory Journalism*

“This edited volume provides a timely and interdisciplinary overview of alternative media research as it gains importance in journalism and political communication studies. It combines diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives to build stronger conceptual foundations and more context-aware approaches. The book also tackles normative and ethical questions involved in researching controversial alternative media actors and their societal impact. An essential read for scholars and graduate students working on media systems, political communication, and digital publics.”

— Thorsten Quandt, University of Münster, Germany, Professor of Online Communication and co-author of *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*

“This exceptional book provides a much-needed, up-to-date and forward-looking account of the increasingly important role that alternative media play in Europe today. Its wide range of contributors, all experts in the field, provide diverse and invaluable conceptual, methodological and contextual insights, making it a must-read for anyone interested in better understanding the phenomenon of alternative journalism in a digital age.”

— Folker Hanusch, University of Vienna, Austria, Professor of Journalism, Vice-Chair of the World of Journalism Study and editor of *Comparing Journalistic Cultures*

Eva Mayerhöffer • Miriam Kroman Brems
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Editors

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Editors

Eva Mayerhöffer 
Department of Communication and Arts
Roskilde University
Roskilde, Denmark

Tine Ustad Figenschou
Department of Journalism and
Media Studies
OsloMet
Oslo, Norway

Miriam Kroman Brems
Department of Media and
Journalism Studies
Aarhus University
Aarhus, Denmark

Centre for Journalism and Digital
Democracy Centre
University of Southern Denmark
Odense, Denmark

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk
Department of Journalism and
Media Studies
OsloMet, Oslo, Norway



ISBN 978-3-032-22488-0 ISBN 978-3-032-22489-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7>

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Acknowledgments This open-access publication was made possible by the Carlsberg Foundation through funding of the research project Alternative Media and Ideological Counterpublics (AlterPublics), grant number CF20-0247.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Miriam Kroman Brems is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Journalism and the Digital Democracy Centre at the University of Southern Denmark. When she carried out the work presented in this volume, she was employed as a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University. She did her award-winning PhD dissertation on the use and users of alternative media in Denmark. Placed at the intersection of political communication, journalism studies, and media studies, her research focuses on the democratic implications of the proliferation of alternative sources of news and information like alternative media, alternative social media, and social media influencers.

Stephen Cushion is a professor at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University. His research focuses on political communication and journalism studies, particularly topics related to political reporting, impartiality, misinformation and alternative media. He has written and published widely on issues related to news, politics and journalism, supported by projects funded by UKRI council grants or commissioned by media organisations, such as Ofcom.

Ernesto de León is a postdoctoral researcher at the Amsterdam School of Communication Science and member of the Algorithmic Society (AlgoSoc) consortium. He holds a PhD from the University of Bern. He is interested in questions related to political information consumption and its effect on political identities and behaviour, as well as the role that social network sites and algorithms play in an electorate's engagement with news.

Tine Ustad Figenschou is Professor in Journalism at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. Figenschou is Co-Leader of the Digital Journalism Research Group. Her current research interests comprise alternative media, media criticism, mediated mobilization and mediated marginalization. Figenschou is the author of two books and has published widely in leading international journals.

Lena Frischlich is an associate professor at the Digital Democracy Centre at the University of Southern Denmark. Her research interests include the emergence of new opportunity structures in the digital realm for both manipulative communication such as propaganda, disinformation, or hate speech but also for strengthening democracy and empowering individual media users. She studies these questions from an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological perspective, combining quantitative, qualitative, and computational measures.

Steffen Göths works as a research associate at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. In his ongoing doctoral project, he analyses conspiracy theories from the perspective of public sphere theories. His further fields of research are alternative media, social theory, and critical communication and media studies.

Annett Heft is Professor of far-right extremism research with focus on media and public spheres at the University of Tübingen and head of the research group “Dynamics of Digital Mobilization” at the Weizenbaum Institute and the FU Berlin. Her main fields of research are the comparative study of political communication and mobilisation in Europe with a focus on digital public spheres, right-wing communication infrastructures, transnational communication as well as quantitative methods and computational social science.

Frederik Weber Henriksen is a postdoctoral researcher at Roskilde University’s Department of Communication and Arts and a member of the Digital Media Lab, working on the ECHOPOL and AlterPublics projects. He holds a PhD in political communication from Roskilde University (2024). His work sits at the intersection of communication, sociology, and computational social science, focusing on digital publics and anti-systemic movements in democratic societies.

Kristoffer Holt is Professor at the Department of Media and Journalism at Linnaeus University, Sweden, where he also leads the interdisciplinary knowledge environment Democracy in Question and is a member of the Center for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies. His research explores the role of media as a platform for public discourse and democracy. He has published extensively on alternative news media, media criticism, and citizen and participatory media. He is also advisory board member of the NGO Sustainable Journalism Partnership.

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk is Professor in Journalism at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. Ihlebæk is currently co-leading the research group Media Industries, Platforms and Politics (MIPP) and a member of the Digital Journalism Research Group. She is also a Working Group Leader in the Cost Action Network “Redressing Radical Polarisation: Strengthening European Civil Spheres Facing Illiberal Digital Media”. Her research interests include alternative media, media criticism, journalism, political communication, and media regulation.

Michael Karlsson is Professor in Media and Communication at Karlstad University, Sweden. His research interest are theoretical, methodological and normative issues related to digital journalism, political communication and climate communication. His latest international books are *Journalistic Autonomy. The Genealogy of a Concept* (Missouri University Press, 2022) together with Henrik Örnebring and *Transparency and Journalism. A Critical Appraisal of a Disruptive Norm* (Routledge, 2021).

Jakob Bæk Kristensen is an associate professor of Digital Methods and head of tech of the Digital Media Lab at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, Denmark. He holds a PhD in Media and Communication from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He has worked on mapping online alternative news environments in Northern and Central Europe as part of the research project AlterPublics.

Eva Mayerhöffer is Associate Professor of Political Journalism and Comparative Media Studies at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark. She is Co-Director of the Centre for Digital Citizenship and Co-Leader of the Research Group Digital Publics and Trust at Roskilde University. Her research focuses on the relation between elites and countermovements in journalism and political communication, currently with a special focus on digital information flows,

digital (counter)publics and the formation of digital alternative news environments.

Niels G. Mede is an assistant professor of Communication Science in Life Science Contexts in the Strategic Communication Group at Wageningen University & Research (WUR), Netherlands. In his research, he focuses on science communication, public perceptions of science, populism, and survey methodology.

Julia Metag is a professor at the Department of Communication at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research interests include science communication, political communication, and media effects.

Clara Juarez Miro is a Beatriz Galindo Fellow in the Political Science Department at the University of Barcelona. Previously, she was a postdoctoral researcher on the FWF project “Audience Expectations of News in the Digital Age” at the University of Vienna’s Journalism Studies Center. She holds a PhD in Mass Communication with a minor in Political Psychology from the University of Minnesota (2022). Her research focuses on political communication and journalism, with a particular interest in populism, online communities, and audience expectations of news.

Philipp Müller is Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim, Germany. He holds a PhD (2015) from LMU Munich. His research deals with political communication and its contribution to the functioning of democracy as well as the social and psychological dynamics of media and communication change.

Leif Hemming Pedersen is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, where he works on the AlterUse project, exploring alternative media use in Denmark. He holds an MA in Journalism and English and a PhD in Media and Communication from Roskilde University. His research interests include recognition theory, audience research, alternative media, and mediatization.

Mike S. Schäfer is Full Professor of Science Communication at the Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ), University of Zurich, Switzerland. His research focuses on public science communication, climate change communication, and the role of AI.

Beate Schirmmacher is an associate professor of comparative literature at the Department of Film and Literature at Linnaeus University, Sweden and part of the Linnaeus University Center of Intermedial and Multimodal Studies. She has published widely on intermediality in literature, music and art. Currently, her research explores the intermediality of digital media and news narration, most recently within *The Transformation and Consequences of News on TikTok (TACTik) (2026-2028)*.

Heidi Schulze is a research associate at the Department of Media and Communication at LMU Munich, Germany. In her research, she focuses on online radicalization dynamics, radical/extremist (group) communication on social media platforms and fringe communities, and characteristics and audiences of alternative and hyperpartisan news websites. To study these phenomena, she employs a mixed-methods approach focusing on quantitative and computational methods.

Nataliia Steblyna ScD in Political Sciences is a professor at the Department of Journalism and Social Communications at Vasyl Stus Donetsk National University, Ukraine. She is also a freelance journalist and a media analyst at Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy. Her research interests include digital journalism, political communication, and new media.

Jesper Strömbäck is Professor in Journalism and Political Communication at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His most recent book is the edited volume “Knowledge resistance in high-choice information environments” (Routledge, 2022). Among other things, his current research focuses on the role of changing media environments in processes of democratic erosion.

Lina Moscoso Teixeira is an invited professor and researcher at IADE, Universidade Europeia. She holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the University of Minho, Portugal, a Master’s degree in Communication Sciences from Universidade Nova de Lisboa, and a degree in Journalism from the University of Fortaleza. Her research topics include alternative media, media activism, digital communication, disinformation, fake news, social movements, populism and social networks.

Salla Tuomola is an assistant professor at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, Denmark. She holds a

PhD in Journalism from Tampere University, Finland. Her research interests include alternative media environments, epistemological questions, democratic theories, and political and public communication.

Liubov Vasylyk ScD in Social Communications, is head of the Department of Journalism at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine. She is a member of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, head of the Council on Journalistic Ethics at the regional organization of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, and a free-lance journalist. She serves as a media expert at Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy. Her research interests include journalism ethics, investigative journalism, and cross media.

Florian Wintterlin is a senior research and teaching associate at the Department of Communication at the University of Münster, Germany. In his research, he focuses on topics such as misinformation, trust, populism, and social media in the context of journalism, political communication, and science communication.

Lena Zils is a PhD student at the Department of Communication at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research focuses on science communication, with particular emphasis on its target audiences and reception at the intersection with political communication. In her dissertation, she examines media coverage of the interaction between science and politics.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction. A Third Stage of Alternative Media Studies

*Eva Mayerhöffer, Tine Ustad Figenschou,
Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, and Miriam Kroman Brems*

THE RESEARCH FIELD OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA STUDIES

Over the past 15 years alternative media, broadly understood as media that in different ways challenge established news genres, routines, and institutions, have rapidly gained renewed scholarly interest. This is a consequence of two developments. First, the increasing digitalization and platformization of news have created a momentum for non-institutionalized

E. Mayerhöffer (✉)

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark

e-mail: evamay@ruc.dk

T. U. Figenschou • K. A. Ihlebæk

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, OsloMet, Oslo, Norway

M. K. Brems

Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University,
Aarhus, Denmark

Centre for Journalism and Digital Democracy Centre, University of Southern
Denmark, Odense, Denmark

e-mail: brems@journalism.sdu.dk

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European
Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_1

actors to establish themselves as news providers in their own right, including actors that are driven by the ambition to provide a counterweight to existing news offers. In contrast to earlier alternative media, which often experimented with new forms of offline news formats (e.g. zines) and local and collaborative forms of news production (e.g. community radio), digital alternative media sought to benefit from digital and social media logics in establishing a news brand and gaining an audience without institutional backing or substantial financial resources (Bruns, 2018; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024). Second, these new possibilities provided by digital platforms have coincided with a larger trend of increasing political polarization, the rise of populist parties and movements and declining levels of systemic trust across the globe. Populist parties, as well as political movements like the “alt-right” in the US, the Brexit movement in the UK or the Pegida movement in Germany quickly realised the potential of directly or indirectly relying on more ‘news-like’ forms of communication for their agenda-setting and community building efforts (Haller & Holt, 2018; Heft et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022).

This volume contributes to consolidating alternative media studies as a research field in its own right and moving the field further into what we argue constitutes a third stage of alternative media studies. To do so, we build on the European context and experience as a fruitful point of departure, as the current research interest in alternative media has been especially strong in Europe, and European scholars have been particularly active in contouring the field. All chapter contributors work at European research institutions and most empirical examples are drawn from research conducted in European countries. This is not to say that anti-mainstream media initiatives and tendencies are not found in other contexts, however, they are less frequently framed as a question of ‘alternative media’ outside of Europe.

There are two main reasons why the phenomenon and concept of alternative media is particularly well-established in Europe. For one, European media outlets, especially on the right-wing of the political spectrum, often actively use the label ‘alternative media’ in their self-positioning and description. Thus, alternative media is here not just an academic label for a certain type of news outlet, but a term that is also found outside the confines of academic discourse. This does not make the challenges of defining alternative media less demanding in a European context, maybe even to the contrary, but may explain why the framework has caught on particularly well here. Second, questions of the boundaries of the journalistic field are particularly strongly negotiated in a European context, as the established media systems as an institutionalized field remain relatively

strong in many, in particular Northern and Western, European democracies (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2026; Pedersen et al., 2024). Here, the question of an ‘alternative’ to a still clearly delineated field of established media becomes particularly relevant. Approaching the question of alternative media from a European perspective thus also entails a focus on media that seek to provide a counterweight to relatively resilient and strong democratic societies and media systems - in contrast to on the one hand, alternative media as a counterpart to media in (semi-)authoritarian regimes or on the other hand to media in commercialized media systems with weak journalistic self-regulation and a lack of common professional standards.

The fact that the volume is to a large degree rooted in European concepts, discourses and data on alternative media does not mean that the presented theoretical, methodological, and systemic perspectives have no implications or relevance for alternative media research in non-European settings. The European perspective and particular take on ‘alternative media’ as a phenomenon can provide a useful prism to study similar types of media (use) in other contexts - not with the goal of a one-to-one transfer, but a careful consideration of how such perspectives can help to qualify and renew established conceptual notions and empirical research trajectories applied to ‘other’ types of media in these contexts, be it grassroots, community, oppositional, activist, hyperpartisan, or anti-systemic media (see also Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2025a). Moreover, also within Europe, macro developments such as disruptive technological changes, economic crises, changes in the political climate, armed conflicts and wars on European soil may change systemic conditions and challenge the notion and relevance of alternative media.

Focusing on alternative media studies as a research field further implies that we do not include contributions from adjacent research trajectories that often address very similar phenomena, albeit under somewhat different conceptual umbrellas. While a number of these research areas contribute vital insights, we focus on approaches that in one way or the other self-identify¹ as researching alternative media more specifically. As the different chapters in this volume show, there already exists a high level of diversity in normative, conceptual, and empirical approaches to the study of alternative media proper, which warrants a narrower focus on what can

¹ This approach of including researchers and research perspectives that self-identify as alternative media research(ers) resonates well with a definition of alternative media as media that self-position as such (Holt et al., 2019; Heft et al., 2020).

be called core alternative media research. This means that we do not include (i) research on journalistic interlopers and peripheral actors (e.g. Eldridge II, 2025, 2018; Maares & Hanusch, 2023; Schapals, 2022), which is concerned with non-traditional news actors as a question of boundaries of the journalistic field; (ii) research on (hyper)partisan media (e.g. Rae, 2021; Knüpfer et al., 2026; Yan & Schroeder, 2024), for which the political nature of these media outlets takes precedence over their status as journalistic actors; nor, (iii) research on journalistic innovation and news start-ups that is concerned with the question of how journalistic newcomers challenge and re-define established news genres, formats, revenue models, and distribution channels (e.g. Hepp & Loosen, 2022; Kammer & Blach-Ørsten, 2025; Usher, 2017; Wu, 2024).

A THIRD STAGE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA STUDIES

The central aim of the book is to bring together different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and systemic analyses that as a whole showcase the diversity of alternative media research, as it enters what we understand as a third stage.

Whereas a first stage of alternative media research had been mostly concerned with grassroot, participatory and community media initiatives, often with a progressive, anti-hegemonic outlook (Atton, 2002; Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Fuchs, 2010; Haas, 2004), the focus of alternative media research from 2016 onwards increasingly turned to another type of alternative media - digital-borne news outlets that often had a right-leaning political profile (Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). The period from 2016 onwards can therefore broadly be characterized as a second stage of alternative media studies, where the emphasis on the potentials of alternative media for democratic emancipation and empowerment was complemented with critical investigations about the negative sides of alternative media, including polarisation, misinformation, distrust, conspiratorial thinking, and hate (e.g., Andersen et al., 2023; Buehling et al., 2025; Frischlich et al., 2021; Henriksen et al., 2024; Klawier et al., 2022; Schulze, 2020; von Nordheim et al., 2019; Staender et al., 2024). Further, in the first stage of alternative media studies, the field was primarily characterized by qualitative approaches (e.g. interview studies and qualitative textual analysis). In the second stage, the methodological toolbox was expanded with quantitative methods particularly seen in the increased use of survey methods, quantitative content

analysis and network analysis. Reflecting the methodological development, the field has been largely dominated by single case studies and more descriptive, exploratory analyses in the first stage and been supplemented with more comparative and explanatory studies in the second stage (e.g., Heft et al., 2021; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Reiter & Matthes, 2023; Staender et al., 2024; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025; Steppat et al., 2023; Theorin & Strömbäck, 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025).

This volume demonstrates how alternative media studies is now entering what we call a third stage of alternative media research, characterized by more cross-theoretical fertilization, methodological innovation and focus on the contextual and comparative elements of alternative media. Alternative media studies as a sub-field of media and communication studies have matured and become integrated in key public and scholarly discussions regarding political communication, journalism, media technology and media publics. Research on alternative media can no longer be considered an academic niche and has become ‘mainstream’ in its own right. Although there are still important and ongoing debates that deserve critical attention, the third stage of alternative media studies has arguably enriched and widened the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological basis of the field on three levels:

1. *The delineations of ‘alternative media’ and normative trajectories*

A central dimension in all research fields concerns scholarly debates about conceptual and theoretical understandings and delineations. The third stage of alternative media studies should be seen in light of two notable and related shifts. First, the field has productively moved away from purely normative and categorical definitions of alternative media. As a consequence, it is now widely acknowledged that the ‘alternativeness’ of alternative media needs to be understood on a spectrum, not as a binary opposite to mainstream media (Kenix, 2011; Rauch, 2016). In recent years, many publications, including many chapters in this volume, have employed the umbrella definition proposed by Holt et al. (2019), which argues for a relational approach to alternative media and its position as a “proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (p. 862). The broad framework proposed by Holt et al., 2019 gives the actors the agency to strategically position themselves in or against a perceived media and societal

mainstream and leaves the normative assessments of whether they fulfil their ambitions to provide an alternative to empirical investigation on the macro, meso and micro level (see also Mayerhöffer, 2021). At the same time, such a broad definition comes with the danger of lumping together ‘apples’ and ‘pears’ both in terms of practices and ideological convictions. Some contributions have consequently sought to more clearly delineate the concept of alternative media from other types of media or actors that also at least to some degree fulfil a criterion of ‘alternativeness’, e.g. by distinguishing alternative from hyperpartisan and conspiratorial media (de León et al., 2024) or by trying to carve out specific sub-types of alternative media outlets or users (e.g. Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021; Brems, 2022; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025; Noppari et al., 2019; Peeters & Maesele, 2024; Schwaiger, 2022; Schwarzenegger, 2023). Others have focused on the delineation of alternative media from other forms of alternative information producers and curators, arguing that alternative media fulfil rudimentary criteria of a news outlet in a more institutionalized way, such as an editorial structure, news formats, or a regular publication frequency (Heft et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2024; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024).

These conceptual discussions point to larger questions concerning normativity in the field. Whether or not it is possible and desirable to label both progressive and regressive projects as alternative media remains a matter of open disagreement in the field. A central point of discussion here is in which way alternative media research can and should encompass those media that only subjectively or even strategically claim to represent positions marginalized in established media, in other words are not ‘real’ alternatives to a hegemonic order (Jeppesen et al., 2025; see also Jackson & Kreiss, 2023). These are important discussions that also inform the contributions in this volume. All too often, however, alternative media research currently finds itself caught up in discussions of appropriate definitions and which media to include or exclude in the category of alternative media. As important as these considerations are - both conceptually and empirically - they must not hinder the field in moving towards asking questions not only about what alternative media are but also what they do, i.e. questions about their production routines and conventions, performance, engagement with users, relations to other societal actors, etc. Put differently: what is needed is transparency in definition and normative positioning, not a universal definition of alternative media that the entire field can agree on.

In the third stage, as demonstrated in this volume, we find more studies engaging in these in-field debates and make room for multiple approaches, underlining that the different normative trajectories and conceptual delineations have different functions and are grounded in a growing diversity of theoretical approaches. In Chap. 2, Miriam Kroman Brems and Eva Mayerhöffer contrast four normative models of democracy (electoral, deliberative, participatory, and agonistic) and discuss how alternative media are understood and evaluated differently from each perspective, and which implications this has for empirical research on alternative media. Jesper Strömbäck and Michael Karlsson elaborate in Chap. 3 on the dominant liberal-democratic perspective and develop a framework for understanding when, why, and how different types of political alternative media might strengthen or weaken democracy. Drawing on critical theory, Steffen Göths in Chap. 4 challenges non-normative approaches to studying alternative media and proposes that we need to be able to distinguish between media that claim to be alternative and those that are alternative. Further, he argues that it is necessary to delineate the wide range of alternative media outlets with regard to their emancipatory potential. Chapters 5 and 6 turn the focus to alternative news production and producers. In Chap. 5, Beate Schirmacher and Kristoffer Holt provide a conceptual foundation for studying the modalities of alternative media in performing alternativeness. In Chap. 6, Salla Tuomola argues that alternative news producers need to be understood as alternative epistemic authorities that challenge and potentially even transform existing notions of knowledge and truth in society. Chapters 7 and 8 contribute with two novel theoretical perspectives that can inform the study of alternative media use. In Chap. 7, Leif Hemming Pedersen draws on theories of recognition to discuss how the use of alternative media can be understood in terms of users' struggles to affirm identities, contest social norms and, at times, challenge the very order of contemporary society. In Chap. 8, Clara Juarez Miro builds on social identity theory and fan studies to illustrate how these perspectives can provide new understandings of how alternative media use can contribute to meeting community-related needs. Finally, in Chap. 9, Lina Moscoso Teixeira focuses on alternative media as activist media and part of larger social movements and discusses their potential to contribute to social change.

2. *A multidisciplinary field of research and increasing methodological sophistication*

The third stage of alternative media research, we argue, is characterised by methodological awareness, diversity, and sophistication. The methodological richness of the third stage is not least a reflection of the increasing level of inclusion of alternative media as an object of academic inquiry in different scientific disciplines than in the previous stages. Originally primarily addressed in critical media studies, as well as cultural studies and social movement research (e.g. Atton, 2002; Downing, 2000, 2008), alternative media gradually found its way into journalism research (e.g. Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Harcup, 2005, 2013; Kenix, 2013) and finally also into political communication research (e.g. Atkinson & Kenix, 2019; Heft et al., 2020; Leung & Lee, 2014; Müller & Schulz, 2019). With each research field did not only follow a particular focus on alternative media - as anti-hegemonic agents of social change, as challengers of journalistic boundaries, or as info-political organizations that further specific political agendas and potentially contribute to information disorders such as misinformation and 'fake news', polarisation or hate speech. The different research fields concerned with alternative media also brought different traditions and methods of investigations with them.

Today, alternative media scholars demonstrate new methodological awareness based on experiences from studying alternative media over time, and from their first-hand experiences with the challenges, dilemmas, and controversies that arise in these empirical enquiries. In Chap. 10, Lena Frischlich and Heidi Schulze discuss ethical challenges of alternative news research with regards to issues of self-determination, harm prevention, beneficence, fairness, and justice. In Chap. 11, Miriam Kroman Brems argues for the importance of not only speaking about but also with alternative media users and discusses methodological challenges and strategies in gaining research access to this sensitive group. Both chapters provide guidelines for and reflections on techniques and strategies that can be employed when studying alternative media actors and discuss who should (not) be given a voice in research projects and how to deal with research participants who might see research as a platform for furthering their own agendas. In Chap. 12, Lena Zils, Florian Wintterlin, Julia Metag, Niels G. Mede, and Mike S. Schäfer turn more specifically to challenges associated with quantitative, survey-based approaches to measuring alternative news use. These challenges not least stem from the fact that researchers and users are not always aligned in their definition of alternative media. Phillip Müller turns the attention to different manual and computational approaches to collect and analyze alternative news content in Chap. 13.

Furthermore, he stresses the need for scholars to align their methods with their epistemic goals and argues that there is a great potential for content analytical research in the future, for instance with regards to tools for large language models internationally and comparative and longitudinal designs. Finally, in Chap. 14, Jakob Bæk Kristensen and Ernesto de León present research drawing on behavioural digital trace data as an alternative way to study alternative news use and content in direct interaction and discuss potentials and challenges in obtaining data through platform APIs, web tracking data and data donations.

3. *Stronger emphasis on systemic conditions*

Another characteristic of a third stage in alternative media studies is an explicit ambition of and increased emphasis on understanding the systemic conditions of alternative media. As noted above, alternative media studies as a field have traditionally been dominated by single case studies, which ties the empirical insights to specific media and political contexts and makes it difficult to transfer and compare results across national or regional contexts. As elaborated above, the emphasis on explorative and descriptive analysis is related to the fact that research access to alternative media can be difficult, e.g. in terms of access to respondents, access to alternative news content, but also challenges in securing the validity of research findings. In this sense, the focus on individual news outlets or countries has presented an important step to define and develop appropriate research strategies and to establish the field of alternative media research. There are notable exceptions here, conducting comparative analyses of alternative media across different countries (e.g. Heft et al., 2024; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024; Nygaard, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2024; Rone, 2022; Schulze, 2020; Staender et al., 2024; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025) and across ideological leanings (Brems, 2024a, 2024b; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2025b; Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2026; Kristensen et al., 2023).

While such comparative alternative media research has started to emerge in recent years, foregrounding systematic insights into the contextual conditions that can help explain the emergence and character of alternative media across dissimilar contexts is a characteristic of the third stage of alternative media studies. These contexts are often embodied in systemic conditions at the level of the nation state but can also pertain to aspects such as platform logics and affordances, organizational

characteristics, or developments over time. In Chap. 15, Stephen Cushion opens the section by arguing for a more systematic inclusion of alternative media in our existing approaches to describe media systems. Annett Heft and Eva Mayerhöffer provide a discussion of relevant media, political, and societal conditions that can help explain differences in supply of and demand for hyperpartisan alternative media, in Chap. 16. Whereas Chap. 16 approaches the question from a perspective of political information environments, Chap. 17 by Tine Ustad Figenschou and Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, takes a field approach. The chapter discusses how alternative media criticism differs in form and impact depending on the media and political context in which it is embedded. Chapter 18, written by Lena Frischlich and Heidi Schulze, discusses how different platform affordances create opportunity structures for alternative media, focusing specifically on the significance of different alternative social media platforms. The volume closes with two chapters that showcase the relevance of systemic conditions in action. In Chap. 19, Nataliia Steblyna and Liubov Vasylyk describe how Telegram channels in Ukraine have emerged as *de facto* news media in their own right under conditions of war and siege and discuss to which degree these can be understood as alternative media. And, finally, in Chap. 20, Frederik Weber Henriksen presents the approach of an Alternative Media Observatory as a way to facilitate and stimulate cross-national, comparative alternative media research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

By bringing together contributions that present different theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches and systemic conditions relevant to the study of alternative media, the volume provides an overview of the diversity of the field, but also showcases, how different approaches can and must be seen as precisely that: as parts of a larger, integrated research field, in which diversity is not a hindering factor, but a productive force that can help to advance the research field as a whole and contribute to more nuanced and mature research approaches in the future. In drawing on and bringing together existing research findings and trajectories, our volume also highlights some blind spots in current alternative media research. In the following we therefore highlight four key areas where more studies on alternative media are needed:

We need more studies of how and to what extent ongoing changes in platform policies impact on alternative media actors. Alternative media

have been comparatively successful in engaging digital networks and using social media to share and mobilise around their content (Larsson, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019) but are particularly vulnerable to changing platform strategies. Recent political reorientations and changing moderation and fact-checking practices of global tech companies have potential major impact on the editorial strategies, content profile and dissemination channels of alternative media.

We need more knowledge about how the audio-visual turn in the media landscape is affecting alternative media, both as a re-orientation of existing alternative news outlets and the establishment of new outlets that not only are digital-only, but also voice- or video-only. For movements, activists and actors at the political fringes, podcasts and vodcasts have become key formats to communicate directly with and build loyal audiences, in the same way as local and community radio were well-fitted formats for alternative media actors 20–30 years ago. The increasing relevance of anti-mainstream oriented podcasts at the same time re-opens the question of what constitutes an alternative media outlet in the first place.

We need more research on how younger media users relate to alternative media actors, and how and to what extent alternative media outlets are competing for the attention of young audiences. In a time with established news media struggling to reach younger audience segments, young people spending more time engaging with social media influencers, podcasters and YouTubers than established news media actors and younger voter groups moving towards the political fringes. If and how alternative media actors compete over younger media audiences becomes an increasingly important question.

Finally, more systemic and truly comparative work is needed to strengthen our understanding of how contestations play out in different media and political systems, and what the consequences will be both for alternative media actors, the larger media sector and the broader public sphere. Cross-national, but also longitudinal studies are vital to understand under which conditions alternative media initiatives are likely to emerge and flourish, and which role media and platform policies, the established media field, other alternative information producers, changing national and global political landscapes and larger socio-cultural transformations play in this respect.

The contributions in this volume demonstrate that alternative media scholars already today can take departure in a diverse body of theoretical concepts and traditions, draw on a rich palette of sophisticated research

methods and build on significantly better insights on systemic conditions driving and hindering alternative media. In its third stage, the field of alternative media studies is developing into a more multi-faceted sub-field that combines different disciplinary lenses – normatively, conceptually and methodologically – into a more nuanced and situational understanding of what alternative media are and can be and what they add to society. It is crucial for this development that the different approaches not simply co-exist side-by-side in a state of mutual toleration, but in a state of cross-fertilization and mutual critical engagement.

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PART I

Theoretical Cornerstones



CHAPTER 2

Conceptualizing and Evaluating the Democratic Role of Alternative Media: Four Rival Perspectives

Miriam Kroman Brems and Eva Mayerhöffer

INTRODUCTION

Research into alternative media is often, implicitly or explicitly, motivated by an interest in understanding their implications for democracy. As noted in Chap. 1, the original strand of alternative media research predominantly focused on the democratic potentials of left-wing/progressive media initiatives, whereas more recent research has paid particular attention to the democratic dangers of right-wing/populist alternative media (Brems, 2024a; Holt, 2020; Rauch, 2023). This chapter aligns with the view that alternative media and use of them is not inherently good or bad for

M. K. Brems (✉)

Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University,
Aarhus, Denmark

Centre for Journalism and Digital Democracy Centre, University of Southern
Denmark, Odense, Denmark

e-mail: brems@journalism.sdu.dk

E. Mayerhöffer

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European
Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_2

democracy (Frischlich et al., 2023). Rather, this is an empirical question and the answer to it depends on what normative standards for democracy they are assessed against (see also Althaus, 2012; Ihlebæk et al., 2022). There are two main reasons for this. First, different theories of democracy hold different conceptions of and expectations for citizens and news media (e.g. Baker, 2001; Dahlgren, 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). Therefore, they offer different normative standards that empirical findings about alternative media can be compared to (Althaus, 2012; Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Strömbäck, 2005). Second, the theoretical perspective applied gives a certain orientation in the research field (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 4). What aspects of alternative media are explored and research conclusions about what role alternative media “play in society and if, when and how they strengthen or weaken democracy” (Ihlebæk et al., 2022, p. 1278) are thus highly dependent on what democratic standpoint they are studied from.

Against this backdrop, this chapter compares four models of democracy, referred to as the electoral, deliberative, participatory, and agonistic models, and develops a framework for assessing alternative media’s contribution to democracy from the perspective of each. The chapter is thus positioned in prolongation of three central bodies of literature: Research studying the role of (news) media from a public sphere perspective (e.g. Ferree et al., 2002; Wessler, 2018); research on the normative role of journalism in democratic societies (e.g., Baker, 2001; Christians et al., 2009; Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2015; Strömbäck, 2005; Riedl, 2019); and an emerging literature discussing the societal impact of alternative media on media pluralism from different democratic perspectives (Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Urkens et al., 2024). Where these bodies of literature either focus on (news) media or journalism in general or mainly assess the contribution of alternative media against journalistic ideals, the present study offers a novel contribution by focusing specifically on alternative media and evaluating their contribution to democracy against the different models’ conception of the public sphere and the role that news media as well as citizens should ideally play therein. We thus add to the perspective from journalistic information provision, which tends to emphasize normative expectations towards specific news outlets, a focus on the public sphere as an intermediate link between news media and democracy, which also directs normative expectations to the news landscape as a whole.

Assessing alternative media relative to certain ideals for news media or journalism implies that we consider them a form of news media and at least a boundary case of journalism (Mayerhöffer, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2024). While acknowledging that it is debatable whether content

disseminated by alternative media should always be considered news, we believe it makes sense to assess them relative to ideals for news media, partly because they position themselves as correctives of mainstream news media that allegedly fail to live up to such standards (Holt et al., 2019), partly because their users consider and use them as news media (Schwarzenegger, 2023).

The chapter is structured in two main sections. First, we outline how each of the four democracy models understands the public sphere, democracy and democratic legitimacy, and what roles they attribute to citizens and news media in democracy. Second, we outline which democratic potentials and threats alternative media hold from each perspective and discuss what empirical focus points are of particular interest to alternative media research anchored in each perspective. We conclude by discussing implications for alternative media research following from these different normative conceptualizations.

OUTLINE OF FOUR RIVAL MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

The six first columns in Table 2.1 provide an overview of the four models of democracy (electoral, deliberative, participatory, agonistic), focusing on their diverging metaphors for the public sphere, conceptions of democracy and democratic legitimacy, and conceptions of and expectations for citizens and news media. Before we present them in further detail, a few delineations should be made. First, it is important to emphasize that they are not empirical models that existing democracies can be grouped into; they are idealized theoretical models with different normative views on democracy, citizens, and news media. Second, in our understanding, all four models align with fundamental liberal-democratic principles, including selection of powerholders through free, fair, and routinely held elections, equal citizen rights, protection of individual liberties, and freedom of speech, of the press, and of information (see also Chap. 3 in this volume). Third and related, we highlight the normative ideals each model emphasizes, but this does not mean that ideals highlighted in one model are necessarily rejected by other models. Finally, most theories of democracy do not systematically include reflections on the news media. Here, we draw on prior work that has theorized what role news media should ideally play to support democracy as it is conceptualized in each model, as well as normative conceptions of the role of the (mediated) public sphere in democratic societies.

Table 2.1 Four models of democracy and their assessments of the potentials and threats of alternative media

<i>Democracy model</i>	<i>Metaphor for the public sphere</i>	<i>Conception of democracy</i>	<i>Democratic legitimacy derived from</i>	<i>Citizens (conception and ideal role)</i>	<i>Media (conception and ideal role)</i>	<i>Democratic potentials of ANM</i>	<i>Democratic threats of ANM</i>	<i>Empirical focus points of key interest</i>
Electoral	Marketplace	Political bargaining	Elections ensuring proportional representation of individual interests	As rational voters holding individual and diverging interests; Must elect and monitor political powerholders; be trustful yet vigilant	As carriers of information; Must cover societal issues accurately and balanced in proportion to importance; mirror diverging viewpoints in proportion to prevalence; scrutinize powerholders; <i>Favoured genre</i> : News article	Constructive corrective of mainstream media; Increase information and reflection of diverging opinions by covering societal issues overlooked and including other viewpoints; More critical scrutiny of political powerholders	Mislead citizens by circulating misinformation and giving disproportionate attention to specific societal problems; Create attitude polarization by amplifying extreme minority viewpoints, hinder compromises; Undermine legitimacy of representative political system	<i>Misinformation</i> : How (mis)informative is ANM content; are ANM users (mis)informed? <i>Diversity</i> : Do ANM focus on other topics, sources, views than MSM; do ANM users hold fringe or extreme views? <i>Systemic criticism</i> : How prevalent is systemic criticism in ANM content; do ANM users (dis)trust news media and politicians?

Deliberative	Town square	Political discussions	Force of the better argument following civil and rational debate with equal access for all relevant parties; consensus or reasoned dissent	As rational reasoners; Must be willing to engage in discussions with others; open to new information and to reconsider opinions; respect opponents; express themselves in a civil and rational manner	As facilitators of debate; Must inform about societal issues; include all relevant arguments and opinions; ensure civility; <i>Favoured genre:</i> Opinion piece	Expand public debate by adding more arguments giving access to actors otherwise excluded, channelling emerging public concerns into broader public debate	Pollute public debate with ill-informed, emotive, or partisan arguments; Violate civility by delegitimizing opponents	<i>Deliberative quality:</i> What discussions are facilitated by alternative media (diversity and quality of arguments; civility)? <i>Deliberative engagement:</i> What motivates ANM users to participate in political discussions? <i>Opinion formation:</i> How do (discussions about) ANM content contribute to opinion formation and opinion change?
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(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

<i>Democracy model</i>	<i>Metaphor for the public sphere</i>	<i>Conception of democracy</i>	<i>Democratic legitimacy derived from</i>	<i>Citizens (conception and ideal role)</i>	<i>Media (conception and ideal role)</i>	<i>Democratic potentials of ANM</i>	<i>Democratic threats of ANM</i>	<i>Empirical focus points of key interest</i>
Participatory	Community centre	Political inclusion	Empowerment and inclusion of all groups in society ensuring that all citizens can meaningfully participate in democratic life	As actively involved citizens, each with their unique identity; Must be willing to actively engage in public life	As a broadcaster of public interest; Must facilitate community-building and identity formation; emphasize diversity; <i>Favoured genre:</i> User-contributions in any format	Actively engage citizens that feel underrepresented or misrecognized in mainstream media; Empower citizens to find their own political voice and societal identity; Facilitate community-building	Disuade citizens from engaging in public debate and political life (when contributing to affective polarization, hateful and confrontational tone, bullying/trolling)	<i>User involvement:</i> How/to what extent do ANM engage users in news production? <i>Community-building:</i> What types of communities and identities are facilitated by ANM and through which communicative styles? <i>Citizen empowerment:</i> How/to what extent do(es) ANM (use) contribute to political (dis)empowerment; (dis)engagement, public (dis)connection?

Agonistic	Rugby field	Political contestation	Constant struggle for hegemony between legitimate adversaries (not enemies)	As activists and 'friendly enemies'; Must fight passionately for their ideals and conceptions of society	As a site of political struggle and socio-cultural contestation; Must challenge and question hegemonic power structures (including their own); facilitate protest and resistance; <i>Favoured genre:</i> Anything not taught at journalism school	Expose societal inequalities and injustices, challenge hegemonic order; Create a forum for legitimate expressions of political grievances and confrontations of adversaries; Mobilize citizens for protest and resistance.	Contribute to antagonistic societal division and anti-systemness; Seek 'mainstream' inclusion and acceptance	<i>Mobilization:</i> How/to what extent do ANM mobilize citizens for political protest and in favour of what agendas? <i>Contestation:</i> How do ANM position themselves against hegemonic media and politics (styles and content)? <i>Antagonism:</i> Are ANM contributing to affective polarization; support for political violence; and anti-democratic sentiment?
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The Electoral Model: Democracy by the Ballot Box

In the electoral model, the democratic public sphere is often figuratively described as a marketplace of ideas where politicians and citizens play roles analogous to those of merchants and customers: Political parties or candidates put competing political programs on offer and come election day, citizens use their votes to ‘buy’ the ones they prefer (e.g. Christians et al., 2009; Held, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005). These elections give democracy legitimacy as they allow citizens to make their individual preferences heard, ensure that interests are represented with a strength corresponding to the proportion of the population holding them, let citizens replace current political powerholders, and give new ones a legitimate mandate (Baker, 2001; Ferree et al., 2002; Held, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005) to bargain compromises between interests (Galston, 2018).

Citizens thus have two main democratic tasks: Rationally electing political representatives who best represent their interests and monitoring the conduct of current powerholders (Ferree et al., 2002; Moe et al., 2019; Strömbäck, 2005). The latter implies that while citizens must trust the politicians to whom they delegate their influence and accept them as legitimate representatives of the people, they must also retain a healthy scepticism towards powerholders. To fulfil these tasks, citizens must be adequately informed.

To support this, news media must provide accurate and proportional coverage of problems facing society, give equal space in political discussions for opposing parties competing for citizens’ votes and critically scrutinize political powerholders. Furthermore, they must include a multiplicity of viewpoints to mirror diverging interests in the population, in proportion to how widespread they are, as it allows politicians to be responsive to citizen demands between elections (Baker, 2001; Moe et al., 2019; Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2015; Strömbäck, 2005).

The Deliberative Model: The Force of the Better Argument

The deliberative model of democracy is rooted in Habermas’ theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991[1962], 1998[1992]). Metaphorically, democracy can be compared to a town square where citizens engage in civil and rational debates to arrive at solutions to political issues. All parties affected by a given political issue should have equal access to participate (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) and

competing arguments be tested against each other (Eldridge II, 2025; Wessler, 2018), allowing citizens to form opinions on an informed basis. While consensus decisions are sometimes highlighted as the ideal result of such discussions, others have proposed majority decisions supported by arguments as a more realistic outcome (e.g. Wessler, 2018). Regardless, political decisions should be based on the strength of the ideas presented (Ferree et al., 2002).

Citizens are thus expected to be well-informed about political matters and participate actively in deliberative discussions (Strömbäck, 2005). They should be willing to change opinions in the face of better arguments (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Ferree et al., 2002; Strömbäck, 2005) and show respect for their opponents (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). This makes civility a core citizen ideal, understood as accepting the democratic legitimacy of political opponents (Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2021). In mass societies, it is naturally not possible for all citizens to participate directly in public debates. Accordingly, Habermas' later work emphasizes the role of news media as "sounding boards" and "filter beds" that mediate between citizens' life world and the political sphere (Habermas, 2009). In essence, news media must facilitate a public forum for political discussions (Christians et al., 2009; Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2015) where citizens can inform themselves about relevant societal issues and all relevant majority and minority positions can be expressed in a civil manner (Wessler, 2018).

The Participatory Model: Transforming Individuals Into Citizens

The participatory model emphasizes the desirability to maximize continuous inclusion of citizens in the public decisions that affect their lives (Ferree et al., 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). This is connected to an ideal of a "strong democracy" (Barber, 1984), understood as self-government of citizens, "not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is deployed" (Barber, 1984, p. 151). Figuratively, the public sphere can be understood as a community centre. It creates a space that enables and encourages active involvement, but also includes safe spaces to which groups of citizens can withdraw to form identities and foster community building (see also Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Ideally, citizens are as directly involved in collective decision-making as possible in modern mass societies. Just as importantly, such

involvement and participation must be meaningful to citizens: they should be enabled to form opinions, define their identity, and find a public voice. Popular inclusion and empowerment thus go hand in hand (Ferree et al., 2002). Respecting each citizen's unique identity and possibility of expression is a key element in this regard.

In this view, news media need to establish structures to "broadcast the public interest (...) to optimize diversity in terms of information, viewpoints and forms of expression, and which foster full and active citizenship" (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1993, p. 11; see also Strömbäck, 2005). News media also fulfil an important role in countering the hidden, status-quo oriented power structures that obscure what is really at stake in society by empowering citizens to know and formulate their own interests (Ferree et al., 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003). Media use is crucial for citizens' "public connection" by enabling people to connect to others and engage with the public issues they encounter in everyday life, a central prerequisite for political participation and engagement (Couldry et al., 2007). As part of this, news media should connect citizens with shared interests and facilitate spaces for identity formation (Dahlberg, 2011). The participatory model encourages a broad range of journalistic styles and is weary of rigid criteria and demands that might hinder real participation and inclusion (Ferree et al., 2002).

The Agonistic Model: Contestation and Resistance

Figuratively speaking, the agonistic conception of the democratic public sphere can be compared to a rugby field, defined by rough, but rule-based contestation between opposing parties. Closely associated with radical politics, it emphasizes difference, conflict between irreconcilable interests, and resistance (Wessler, 2018). Any given social order is seen as an expression of hegemonic practices that have become naturalized (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015) and what gives life to democracy is that they are constantly challenged in on-going contestations between conflicting interests and identities (Dreyer Hansen & Sonnichsen, 2014; Mouffe, 2000a). Accordingly, attempts at reconciliation and delegitimation of conflict are seen as suppressive acts of hegemony as they always entail exclusion of some groups (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Mouffe, 2000a; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015). Agonism is not to be set equal with antagonism, where adversaries turn into enemies. Indeed, the agonistic perspective argues that only agonistic democracy is capable

of “taming” the antagonistic, extreme forms of conflict in modern democracies by “finding creative ways to sublimate hostility into more constructive forms of contest” (Wenman, 2013, p. 197).

Citizens must be ready to fight passionately for their conception of the good society but act as “friendly enemies” – they are “friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way” from one another (Mouffe, 2000b, p. 13; see also Maesele & Racijsmaekers, 2020). News media can be vessels of power by reproducing the hegemonic order, but also vehicles of change that can catapult counter-hegemonic stances into public debate and mobilize citizens to protest and resist (Christians et al., 2009; Dahlberg, 2011).

The agonistic perspective is rather sceptical of the democratic contribution of corporate or state-run news media, due to their role in (re-)producing hegemony (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). Journalism must thus find ways to “expose its own inequalities and power structures, as well as those in the wider political realm” (Budarick, 2020, p. 201). Ideally, news media should “contribute to the creation of an agonistic public space in which there is the possibility for dissensus to be expressed or different alternatives to be put forward” (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 974). They can facilitate this by ensuring that citizens are “bombed by different views” (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 968) and become aware of clearly differentiated ideological positions (Maesele & Racijsmaekers, 2020; Racijsmaekers & Maesele, 2015). The agonistic perspective is highly sceptical of journalistic professionalization in the sense of developing fixed, universal norms and routines (such as the objectivity norm) and encourages alternative forms of communication, as they allow to speak “across difference in the absence of significant shared understandings” (Young, 1996, p. 129).

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIALS AND THREATS OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

In the following sections, we move to the question of how the four models of democracy outlined above would normatively evaluate alternative media and their potential to foster the respective models’ ideal citizen. We base our discussion on the previously outlined premise that the normative standards associated with each model of democracy serve both as a measuring

stick against which empirical findings can be assessed to take stock of their democratic implications and as a compass steering the direction of empirical research. Following this, the different models do not only diverge in their assessment of specific empirical findings; research departing from each model would typically also be interested in studying different aspects of alternative media and their users in the first place and thus ask different empirical questions. In the discussion, we therefore highlight a) different potentials and threats associated with alternative media that each model would be particularly concerned with as well as b) different empirical research foci each model would apply.

By this, we do not mean to say that research taking, for instance, a deliberative perspective should ideally focus on specific research questions; rather we argue that research taking a deliberative perspective would typically choose to focus on some aspects of alternative media and their users rather than others. Importantly, this does not imply that the empirical focus points highlighted within one model are per se irrelevant to the other models. Furthermore, some empirical focus points are of interest to all models. For instance, media fragmentation would be a concern from all four perspectives, whether because it can hinder rational choice between competing political alternatives; hearing all relevant arguments; public connection; or exposure to the struggle between competing political alternatives (see also Dahlberg, 2007). The points made in the discussion are summarized in the three last columns in Table 2.1.

ASSESSMENT FROM THE ELECTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Democratic Potentials and Threats

From the electoral perspective, alternative media can contribute positively to the media ecology by bringing attention to societal issues overlooked by mainstream media and reflecting opinions otherwise not heard. Thereby, they can contribute to informing citizens (see also Strömbäck, 2023), give people who feel marginalized a sense of media representation, and make it possible for politicians to be responsive to minority viewpoints. Furthermore, with their position outside the mainstream, alternative media can potentially offer more critical scrutiny of political power holders, not least given professional journalism's proximity to power and reliance on elite sources (such as government representatives), which may compromise mainstream media's watchdog role (Baker, 2001; Bennett,

2019). As such, they have potential to serve as constructive correctives of oversights or poor practices of mainstream media (see also Ihlebæk et al., 2022), and great audience demand for alternative media can be interpreted as a reflection that they fill a gap in the market by taking care of needs not met by mainstream media.

Conversely, a central threat is that alternative media misinform citizens about societal issues. This can take the form of circulating outright falsehoods but can also manifest in practices like cherry-picking facts, taking things out of context, or giving disproportionate attention to certain problems to make them appear bigger than they really are. Furthermore, they might amplify minority viewpoints to make them appear stronger than their prevalence among the population merits. These issues could lead citizens to base political decisions on a misleading information basis and lead politicians to be over-responsive to views held only by a small minority of the population. This becomes particularly problematic if alternative media give voice to extreme viewpoints as they may thereby increase attitude polarization and make it difficult for political representatives to bargain compromises. Finally, if alternative media's critical stance towards the media and political mainstream turns into anti-systemness (Holt, 2018; Henriksen, 2024), they may contribute to systemic distrust in news and fact-based information and challenge the legitimacy of politicians as representatives of the people (Brems, 2024b), effectively undermining the foundation of the electoral model.

Empirical Focus Points of Key Interest

Research departing from the electoral model can be expected to be particularly interested in studying how alternative media is related to (mis) information, both in terms of how (mis)informative their content is, (mis) perceptions held by their users, and how users engage with the content to inform themselves. Furthermore, research attention would centre on how alternative media contribute to diversity, for instance to what extent their content reflects other news agendas, sources, and views than those found in mainstream media. In relation to this, it is of central importance whether diversity turns into extremism, both with respect to the views mirrored in alternative media and those held by their users. A final empirical focus point of key interest is how alternative media's critical stance towards the media-political mainstream plays out, both in terms of the prevalence and severity of explicit media and political criticism in their content, and in

terms of users' trust in news media and politicians and support for the representative political system.

ASSESSMENT FROM THE DELIBERATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Democratic Potentials and Threats

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, alternative media can contribute positively to the news media ecology by adding more arguments to public debate, thereby allowing citizens to consider a broader plethora of perspectives before forming their opinions. Even if the arguments brought forward by alternative media are of poor quality, including them in public debate gives citizens a chance to see them tested against better ones and become aware of their weaknesses. However, this naturally requires that citizens are exposed to counterarguments, emphasizing the importance that alternative media are not insulated from but enter into dialogue with mainstream media as well as other alternative media and the arguments presented there. Alternative media may also contribute positively by giving access to people and perspectives excluded from mainstream public debate. As such, alternative media have the potential to engage more citizens in public discussions and channel views of citizens driven by emotion and passion into public debate by transforming them into positions that can be met with rational counterarguments (Wessler, 2018). Relatedly, because alternative media are situated closer to civil society, they may serve as the sounding boards that help channel emerging patterns of public concern from the life world of citizens into broader public debate that often centres on the formal representative political system (Habermas, 2009).

While alternative media may add more perspectives to public debate, a key concern is that *more* arguments do not necessarily imply *relevant* arguments. A central question in this regard is whether all arguments deserve testing against better ones or whether some are so ill-informed that they should be filtered out. For instance, alternative media including perspectives from 'alternative experts' critical of vaccines might contribute new aspects to vaccine debates, but arguably not ones that can help citizens form sound opinions. Another concern is that arguments driven by emotion, passion, and partisanship will crowd out rational arguments and lead citizens to form opinions based on emotional responses and partisan identification rather than careful reasoning. Just as importantly, it is highly

problematic if alternative media violate the principle of civility by delegitimizing opponents holding opposite views or giving voice to actors who do (Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2021), especially if circulation of such content causes citizens to become less open to engaging in debates with non-likeminded and to reconsidering their existing views.

Empirical Focus Points of Key Interest

Alternative media research departing from this perspective can be expected to be particularly interested in the deliberative quality of discussions that are facilitated by and form around alternative media, including whether they address matters of common concern, include positions and actors not heard in mainstream media, what arguments dominate the content (rational, emotional, partisan), whether opponents are (de)legitimized both in the content and by quoted or participating actors, and whether moderation is enforced to ensure civil debate. Relatedly, other central empirical focus points regard whether alternative media users live up to deliberative ideals when engaging in discussions. For instance, do they express affective dislike of opponents and exhibit (un)willingness to change their opinions or (in)ability to critically assess the quality of arguments presented?

ASSESSMENT FROM THE PARTICIPATORY PERSPECTIVE

Democratic Potentials and Threats

From a participatory perspective, alternative media can contribute positively to democracy by making citizens (more) actively engaged in politics and society, especially citizens that are or feel overlooked by mainstream media and politics. Ideally, alternative media will let citizens speak for themselves rather than speak on their behalf, and actively involve citizens in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news. Concepts frequently evoked in this context are e.g. “participatory journalism”, “grassroots journalism”, or “citizen journalism” (Hall & Hintz, 2019; Carpentier et al., 2013). Where active involvement and collaboration with citizens is not possible, alternative media can play a positive role by disseminating content that helps citizens find their political voice and identity and in the long run enables them to actively participate in politics and society. This is especially true for minorities and marginalized citizens, for which alternative media can provide a ‘safe space’, a sense of

community, and a means of empowerment. As community media, alternative media can provide safe spaces for learning that encourage creativity and self-expression and lead to the enactment of citizenship (Rennie, 2006).

Even though the participatory perspective on alternative media often is found and expressed in relation to progressive media (e.g. Bailey et al., 2007; Downing, 2001; Harcup, 2013), it should not by default be restricted to these. The participatory perspective is, however, inherently cautious about populist-oriented alternative media creating a mere ‘illusion’ of participation and empowerment. A critical question is in which ways ‘us vs. them’ discourses and more extreme views are acceptable if they lead to more active political engagement and user collaboration. In a participatory perspective, these are not ruled out per se, especially if they target powerful actors and hegemonic societal structures rather than build on individual and group-based resentment. The focus on participation and empowerment comes to its clear limits when alternative media give voice to citizens and groups that are anti-democratic, divisive, and hateful. Participatory journalism that actively involves its users in promoting the infringement of participatory and democratic rights for other citizens in society would be seen as a perversion of the concept. The same goes for dissemination of content that helps give voice to, facilitate, and empower communities of repressive views and movements.

In other words, alternative forms of journalistic expression must not come at the expense of the participation of others. Alternative media thus become a democratic threat if their style becomes hyperpartisan, contentious, and divisive and thus contributes to a coarsening of public debate, not least on digital platforms, and increasing affective polarisation in society (Iyengar et al., 2019), which in turn may lead citizens to refrain from speaking and engaging publicly and withdraw from political life, out of fear of being bullied, trolled, or harassed.

Empirical Focus Points of Key Interest

Research departing from the participatory model can be expected to be particularly interested in studying to what extent alternative media engage and involve users in news production. The participatory perspective also holds an interest in alternative journalistic styles and practices that are apt to foster active media use, especially for marginalized user groups. Finally, a key interest lies in the question of how alternative media (use) can contribute to fostering public (dis)connection, civic (dis)engagement, and a

sense of societal recognition (see also Chap. 7 in this volume) on the level of the individual, as well as to building and nurturing communities – and when they fail to do so or do so at the expense of other groups in society.

ASSESSMENT FROM THE AGONISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Democratic Potentials and Threats

From an agonistic perspective, news media support democracy when they facilitate political contestation (Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2015). Since mainstream media are typically assumed to reproduce the existing hegemonic order (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006), media with a more alternative and activist orientation are not simply acceptable, but crucially needed for democracy to thrive as they can help shed light on lines of conflict in society that are being suppressed by an elite or mainstream consensus.

The ambition of alternative media to openly challenge mainstream media and politics is a key element in this, and outspoken criticism of established media is encouraged (see also Chap. 17 in this volume). Contestation and resistance must be enacted outwardly and actively, also by its users. Alternative media can contribute positively by expressing political grievances and pointing to injustices and avenues for action, but also by directly mobilizing citizens to engage in collective protest and resistance. Alternative media are thus an asset to democracy if they initiate and engage in political contestation – but they must do so without antagonizing political opponents (see also Freudenthaler, 2020). This means that their construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ must build on ideological differences and not be reduced to questions of ‘right vs. wrong’ where opponents are portrayed as irrational or evil (for a similar argument, see Maesele & Raeijmackers, 2020). From an agonistic perspective, alternative media with a hyperpartisan, controversy-seeking agenda and style are thus not per se problematic, as long as they do not drift into antagonism by seeking and instigating societal division and turning adversaries into enemies. Agonistic alternative media can even be seen as a safeguard against mediated antagonism, as it allows channelling citizens’ political grievances and protests into more legitimate ways to express dissent.

In line with this conflict-oriented perspective on politics, alternative media can add to the media ecology by representing alternative or marginal actors and preferences (Maesele & Raeijmackers, 2020) and

embracing a range of unconventional communicative styles, not least ones that are apt to evoke emotions and indignation. Any tendencies of alternative media to normalize their journalistic appearance or to strive at least partly for acknowledgment from the political mainstream directly jeopardize the democratic potential of these media. If alternative media start resembling mainstream media in content, appearance, and style, they have missed their calling and clear challengers to the hegemonic order would be missing from the media landscape, leaving it unable to stimulate the democratically vital political contestation.

Empirical Focus Points of Key Interest

For research rooted in agonistic democracy, it would be particularly important to study which role(s) alternative media (content) play in political mobilization and political protest, in the offline and, particularly, in the digital realm. A related key empirical focus point is in which ways and to what extent alternative media serve as a real challenger to a media and societal mainstream, both in terms of the communicative styles they employ and the political alternatives they present, as well as whether they succeed in bringing about societal change. Finally, research departing from the agonistic perspective would be interested in exploring whether and when alternative media turn antagonistic and how this contributes to political violence, affective polarization, or anti-democratic sentiments among their users.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have normatively approached alternative news media from four different strands of democratic theory – an electoral, a deliberative, a participatory, and an agonistic perspective. Such an exercise always comprises a certain level of idealisation and analytical reduction. Thus, the proposed framework should not be seen as rigid and closed, or the only right way to distinguish between different models of democracy and their normative implications for (alternative) media. Rather, it should serve as an invitation for the emerging field of alternative media studies to actively (re-)visit its manifold, but often implicit, normative underpinnings.

We argue that current conceptual disagreements within the field of alternative media research (see Chaps. 1 and 4) can at least partly be understood as the result of scholars approaching the field from different

democracy-theoretical perspectives which, in turn, leads to a focus on different empirical questions and different normative evaluations of empirical findings. This is not a problem *per se* – but does come with a risk of introducing analytical bias and blind spots, if not made explicit. This is particularly true for the field of alternative media research, which has emerged at the cross-over of several disciplines that often study (or define) alternative media of one particular ideological leaning. To further consolidate alternative media research as an integrated field that is not characterised by research silos either studying left- or right-wing media or focusing on alternative media as agents of either social change or misinformation, more cross-fertilisation between normative perspectives and their associated empirical foci is needed.

This proposition has at least three central implications for alternative media research. First, alternative media scholars must be open to studying different types of alternative media from the same normative perspective and related empirical research focus. Collaborative journalistic practices can and should e.g. also be studied for right-wing alternative media, just as misinformation might be relevant to study in left-leaning alternative media.

Second, alternative media scholars must be open to consider different normative expectations for news media and citizens when describing and analysing individual alternative news media as well as their contribution to the overall media ecology, rather than assessing alternative media's democratic value from one perspective only. This will allow for more nuanced evaluations of their democratic impact: For instance, pro-immigration media may be evaluated positively from the agonistic perspective if they mobilize for protests against racism but negatively from the deliberative perspective if mobilisation happens through an uncivil style. Third, researchers that become acquainted with alternative media coming from a specific empirical interest (e.g. in right-wing extremism, misinformation, digital activism) must be attentive to the fact that a specific research focus often aligns with certain normative conceptions of democracy and be wary that the specific focus and normative perspective does not decide in its entirety what alternative media are and should be.

To be clear: we are not suggesting that alternative media researchers need to switch their normative point of departure like they switch their socks. But we do propose that the field of alternative media studies as a whole will profit greatly from a higher level of awareness and reflection of different strands of democratic theory underpinning this heterogeneous

field, and that scholars make clear what conceptions of democracy they approach the field from when making normative evaluations. We acknowledge that this necessitates a non-normative, relational approach (Holt et al., 2019) to defining alternative media – which, not least from a point of theory of democracy, is not without challenges (see e.g. Chap. 4 in this volume). As we have shown in this chapter, such a non-normative umbrella definition of alternative media does not render normative conceptions of news media's role in a democratic society irrelevant or uninteresting but moves normative questions away from what alternative media *are* to assessments of how they *perform*.

Acknowledgments Parts of this research have been supported by the Carlsberg Foundation (grant number CF20-0247) and Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 2097-00026A).

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Friends, Foes, or Does It Depend? Toward a Normative Framework for Assessing (Alternative) Media

Jesper Strömbäck and Michael Karlsson

INTRODUCTION

While different types of alternative media have a long history, digitalisation has significantly lowered the barriers and costs for establishing and running alternative media. As a result, the number of alternative media has seemingly exploded, and although their nature, reach and impact vary between them as well as across countries (Heft et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2018; Staender et al., 2024), they have become more important. This development is significant, as they both compete with mainstream news media and have the potential to disrupt traditional norms, values, and practices of journalism and political communication (Benkler et al., 2018; Ekman & Widholm, 2024; Strömbäck, 2023).

J. Strömbäck (✉)

Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg,
Gothenburg, Sweden

e-mail: jesper.stromback@jmg.gu.se

M. Karlsson

Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University,
Karlstad, Sweden

A key question is however how alternative media should be assessed from a democratic perspective. Do they strengthen or weaken democracy? Or does it depend?

In the abstract and given the wide variety of different types of alternative media, it might be tempting to state that it depends. Such a conclusion would however beg the question: depends on what? To answer that, without falling in the trap of subjectivity, there is a need for a normative framework that is clearly anchored in democratic theory (Baker, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005; Urkens et al., 2024). The aim of this chapter is therefore to propose such a framework, anchored in liberal democratic theory. From this follows that the framework should apply not only to alternative media, but also mainstream news media. This is important, since the boundaries between different types of media are porous and neither mainstream news media or alternative media are monoliths (Rauch, 2016).

CONCEPTUALIZING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

There is certainly no lack of literature on the democratic functions or roles of media. For a proper normative framework, it is however important to anchor the discussion in democratic theory (e.g., Althaus, 2012). Our normative framework builds on liberal democratic theory (Coppedge et al., 2011; Lührmann et al., 2018). While an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, liberal democratic theory emphasizes the importance of certain *institutional* and *procedural* arrangements that go beyond elections and the right of the majority. More specifically, it builds on the core democratic value that “all human beings are of equal intrinsic worth” (Dahl, 2006, p. 4) and emphasizes three mutually constitutive pillars of democracy: (1) free, fair, and recurring elections, (2) protection of civil and political rights and freedoms, and (3) horizontal checks and balances (Coppedge et al., 2011; Dahl, 1998; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann et al., 2018).

Free, fair and recurring elections require that voting is not suppressed, that all voters have equal access to the ballot boxes, and that all votes are counted. This is however not enough, as there are numerous ways that a regime might tilt the electoral playing field to their advantage. Hence, the requirement of free, fair and recurring elections also requires that no parties or candidates are forbidden to run for elections, that election campaigns are not manipulated to (dis)favor some parties or candidates, and

that all parties or candidates have in principle equal opportunities to run their campaigns and reach out to voters.

The second pillar is legal protection of civil and political rights and freedoms. These include the right to vote and stand for elections, freedom of speech, the freedoms of the press, assembly, association and religion, and freedom to receive and share information. Importantly, these civil and political rights and freedoms need to apply equally to all citizens in a country, including minorities, and be enforced by law (Dahl, 1998). As noted by Coppedge et al. (2011, p. 253), “principles and procedures must be established so as to ensure that rule by the majority does not result in the oppression of minorities or the loss of individual liberties.”

The third pillar is horizontal checks and balances, including the rule of law. To ensure that the executive does not overstep its powers, there must be a separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. There also needs to be multiple institutions and organizations, such as the judiciary, oversight agencies and civil society organizations, that are independent from and can function as checks on the executive and legislative powers and hold them accountable. Such checks and balances include the bureaucracy, that need to “act in accordance with statute and not at the political and personal whim of an autocratic executive” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 4). In short, horizontal checks and balances shall ensure that the country is governed by law, that the laws apply equally to everyone, and that no powers overstep their boundaries.

Importantly, these pillars are *mutually constitutive* in that they support each other and are closely interconnected (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Without protection of civil and political rights and freedoms, for example, elections would not be free and fair, but protection of civil and political rights and freedoms requires horizontal checks and balances and the rule of law. Taken together, this institutional framework enables political processes that ideally are characterized by *enlightened understanding* and *effective participation* (Dahl, 1998, pp. 37–38). This is also where the democratic functions of the media come in.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE DEMOCRATIC FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDIA

Given the above, a key question is the role of media – both mainstream and alternative – within democracies. Before delving into that, it needs to be emphasized that free and autonomous media are not just important from a democratic perspective; they are intrinsic features of liberal democracy (Baker, 2002; Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Strömbäck, 2005).

The relationship between democracy and the news media has consequently been conceptualized as a *social contract* (Sjøvaag, 2010; Strömbäck, 2005). From that perspective, news media require democracy as it is the only form of government that respects the freedoms of speech, press, expression and information, and the autonomy of media vis-a-vi the state. These rights and freedoms are prerequisites for news media to function, and by protecting and respecting these, democracy fulfils its part of the social contract.

At the same time, *enlightened understanding* and *effective participation* (Dahl, 1998) require that people are at least reasonably informed about politics and society. Although there is dissensus on exactly how informed people need to be, and what type of knowledge matters most, there is broad scholarly consensus that the more informed people are, the better from a democratic perspective (Bartels, 1996; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lupia, 2016). In this context, media and in particular the news media are particularly important for three reasons.

First, they are the main sources of information about matters beyond people's personal experiences (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Although digitalization has radically transformed patterns of media use and what types of media people use to inform themselves (Nelson & Lei, 2018; Newman et al., 2023), people still get most of their information about politics and society through media. Most news is also still produced by traditional news media, regardless of whether it is consumed through news media channels, social media, search, or generative AI. What people know thus depends on the combination of what information can be found in different types of media (*supply*) and what media people use (*demand*). The mediated information environment and its structure thus matter and sets the boundaries for what information people can access (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Castro et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Second, media facilitate the flow of information between those in power and people at large (Cook, 2005; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). More

specifically, they facilitate the flow of information *from* and *about* those in power to people in general, allowing people to inform themselves about how those in power perform and whether they are acting in the public interest (*top-down information flow*). They also facilitate the flow of information from and about society at large to those in power as well as people in general, alerting about societal problems that need to be addressed (*bottom-up information flow*). Finally, they facilitate the flow of information between citizens, and between those in power, connecting them with each other and informing them of others' experiences and views (*horizontal information flow*). Thereby, media function as arenas for public debates and deliberations (Baker, 2002; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Third, media – in particular news media – function as watchdogs and burglar alarms (Camaj, 2013; Zaller, 2003). By investigating, monitoring, and reporting on what is happening in politics and society, they provide people and stakeholders with information they can act upon to hold those in power accountable. For example, they may expose abuses of power and corruption. Providing information about immoral or illegal behaviours is one way of holding those in power accountable and opens up for others to hold them legally and not just politically accountable. By acting as watchdogs, media help curb immoral or illegal behaviours. Thereby they have a deterrent effect on corruption. As noted by Camaj (2013, p. 22) “a free press is among the most effective mechanisms of external controls on bureaucratic corruption and promotion of good governance”.

There are however at least two problems with this framework for understanding the intimate and contractual relationship between liberal democracy and media. The first is that it was developed at a time when traditional news media were the only type of media that really mattered. Whether it also applies to other types of media is thus an open question. The second is that it is silent with respect to a key question: what type of information and information flows the media should supply and facilitate. Both are highly problematic at a time of democratic backsliding and erosion (e.g., Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) when there is a greater abundance of false and misleading information than ever, and when governments often are sources of false and misleading information (Howard, 2020; Kessler et al., 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

THE TYPES OF INFORMATION THAT MATTER

According to classic accounts, the primary purpose of journalism is “to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing”, to quote Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021, p. xx). Extending that reasoning from journalism to media more broadly, people need information in their roles as citizens, that enables them to become or stay informed about politics and society. A key question then is what characterizes such information. Our key argument is that the ultimate characteristic of such information is that it gets as close to empirical truth as possible.

Separating Facts and Opinions

To unpack our argument, a first distinction needs to be made between attitudes and opinions on the one hand, and facts and evidence on the other. While both are important parts of politics, including the media coverage thereof, they are fundamentally different concepts. Most importantly, attitudes and opinions are about evaluations of different objects (person, party, issue, etc.) and how people think matters *should be* (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In contrast, facts pertain to how things actually *are*, that is, what evidence shows is true or reasonable to think of as true (Glüer & Wikforss, 2022). Beliefs, then, refer to people’s thoughts about how things are. Hence, while beliefs, attitudes and opinions are subjective, facts depend on evidence. Attitudes and opinions cannot be wrong, but beliefs about facts and evidence can – and often are (Glüer & Wikforss, 2022; Young, 2023).

This is not to deny that evidence on a particular matter may be inconclusive, that truth may be elusive, or that what we think is truth today might change in light of new evidence. In any given moment, there is nevertheless more evidence for some accounts of reality than others, meaning that there are well-founded reasons to take them to be true and others to be false or misleading (Flynn et al., 2017; Glüer & Wikforss, 2022). For example, given the scientific evidence that human activity is the main cause of global warming (IPPC, 2023), there are well-founded reasons to consider it a truth.

Evidence is hence crucial but comes in many forms. It is, however, always empirical, and hence the evidence can be stronger or weaker depending on the amount of empirical support and how *systematic* the evidence is. A research report building on an empirical investigation is

thus stronger evidence than whatever politician or influencer is claiming, to take an example that should but might not – given the number of misperceptions that persist in the face of evidence – appear obvious.

From this follows several requirements that any type of media need to fulfil for a piece of information to be of the kind that people need to be free and self-governing. *First*, they need to verify the information and make sure that it corresponds to evidence. *Second*, they need to make the distinction between facts and opinions clear. *Third*, they should always give preferential treatment to facts.

While these normative demands are standard within journalism theory (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021), matters are complicated by the fact that so much of news focus on to what politicians and other news sources are saying rather than on hard facts, actual policies, or the impact of different policies (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 2005). In that sense, “News is [...] a parasitic institution; its product is the deeds and words of others” (Tiffen et al., 2014, p. 374). The fact that news is often literally dependent on news sources to get information unfortunately makes journalism vulnerable. This holds particularly true at a time of “post-truth” (McIntyre, 2018) where evidence suggests that politicians and others in power often are sources of false and misleading information (Howard, 2020; Young, 2023).

This creates the dilemma that on the one hand, information about what politicians and others in power are saying can be considered one kind of information that citizens need to be free and self-governing. On the other hand, by relying on and reporting what politicians and others are saying, media might aid the dissemination of false and misleading information (Tsfati et al., 2020), which is the opposite to providing citizens with the kind of information they need to be free and self-governing.

Truth and Bias

A classic journalistic approach to address this dilemma, and avoid accusations of bias, is to strive for balance by providing space for different sides in a political debate or conflict. While such an ‘he said/she said’ approach makes sense when it comes to attitudes and opinions, it is however problematic whenever the issue pertains to facts. To begin with, no reader or listener learns anything about what is actually true from hearing different sides claiming different versions of reality (Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Terzian, 2025). It also obscures the distinction between attitudes and opinions on

the one hand and facts on the other. In addition, it fuels politically motivated reasoning and thereby contributes to a politicization of facts (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Rekker, 2021). The reason is that when people make up their mind, they typically rely on cues (Zaller, 1992). Therefore, they are more likely to believe the version of truth – regardless of the underlying evidence, about which people typically have only limited knowledge – that is propagated by the side they identify with. Finally, it contributes to false balance (Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Terzian, 2025). As noted by Muñoz-Torres (2012, p. 576), “the principle of ever presenting opposing views as equally valid amounts to stating implicitly that all opinions possess the same value as truth-claims”. Thereby, balance pertaining to factual matters leads away from rather than gets to the truth.

The problem is hence not only that media and journalism are highly dependent on news sources and their accounts of reality. It is also that they typically subscribe to a narrow version of truth where they only assess whether it is true that Y has said X without checking whether X is true. In other words, it is typically more important for them to quote or attribute statements correctly than whether the content of quotes or statements corresponds to evidence. Thereby, they may aid the dissemination of false and misleading information.

From this follows three additional requirements that any media need to fulfil for information to be of the kind that people need to be free and self-governing. *Fourth*, they need to verify that the substantial content in quotes and attributed statements from sources corresponds to evidence. *Fifth*, whenever a source disseminates false and misleading information, they should highlight that and what the best available evidence shows. *Sixth*, they should never equate balance with the kind of information people need to be free and self-governing when it pertains to facts.

The situation is different when it comes to opinions. As noted, it is important for people to get information about the opinions of politicians and others with power or a stake in a particular issue. In that context, *diversity* is important since as it “contributes to pluralism and is [...] a prerequisite for both a rational discourse and a well-informed citizenry” (Magin et al., 2025, p. 4).

Like many other concepts, diversity is however multifaceted (Joris et al., 2020; Loecherbach et al., 2020; Urkens et al., 2024). In the context of information that is featured in media, three subdimensions are of special importance: topic diversity, actor diversity, and viewpoint (or discursive) diversity. In short, *topic diversity* refers to the range of different topics or

issues that are being covered; *actor diversity* to the range of different actors that are given voice; and *viewpoint diversity* to the range of different views or perspectives that are given space. For people to be able to inform themselves about politics and society, all these subdimensions are crucial. Following the reasoning above, viewpoint diversity and source diversity is however only positive and contribute to a more informed debate when it comes to opinions. It does not hold when it pertains to factual matters, and viewpoint and source diversity should not be considered more important than facts and evidence. For example, inviting a climate change denier to discuss climate change with a climate scientist would increase viewpoint diversity, but far more important, it would obfuscate the facts and lead to a less informed debate.

THE CHALLENGE OF MISLEADING WHILE TELLING THE TRUTH

Given the above, false or misleading information can never constitute the kind of information people need to be free and self-governing. From this follows that disseminating false or misleading information cannot be justified beyond the purpose of fact-checking and debunking. A major challenge, however, is that information can be misleading even if it is partly true. This may, for example, happen through a selective use of facts, or to phrase it differently: it may be the truth, but not the full truth, and not just the truth. Take for example an immigration-critical alternative media. Such an outlet may publish a number of articles dealing with immigrants that commit crime. Each article may be truthful, but if the media only publish when immigrants commit crimes but not when natives do so, it still pushes misleading information.

This is one example of *narrative persuasion*, whereby an actor engages in cherry-picking and a motivated selection of facts to create an overarching narrative or frame in order not to inform, but to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Cho et al., 2014; Schaffner et al., 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2007). For several reasons, such a strategy may be more effective than outright lies. To begin with, it provides a shield toward accusations of disinformation. Persuasion is also often more effective if it builds upon a kernel of truth since it increases the perceived plausibility and perceived realism of a narrative (Cho et al., 2014). In addition, by repetition, people come to experience elements in the overall narrative as more

familiar, which make them more likely to believe in the truthfulness of the narrative (the so-called *truth effect* or *illusory truth effect*, see Dechêne et al., 2010).

Of course, this is not the only technique that can be used for persuasion rather than informing. The key point is that it is possible and might be more effective to mislead without outright lying, meaning that it is insufficient to take only individual pieces of information into account. The overall narrative created by the composition of individual stories also needs to be considered.

In that context, another important criterion is the degree of one-sidedness a certain media display or whether there is a bias that is systematically (dis)favouring any particular political or ideological orientation (Eberl, 2019; Hopmann et al., 2012). Extending the metaphor of media content as “our modern cartography” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021), if there is a bias systematically (dis)favouring any particular political or epistemic orientation, the information is not of the kind that people need to be free and self-governing.

With respect to traditional news media, research repeatedly finds that there are biases, like negativity bias, that lead them to provide skewed depictions of the world (Lengauer et al., 2012; Soroka & McAdams, 2015). At the same time, with some exceptions (like the UK tabloid press), there is typically no systematic political bias in countries with a liberal or democratic corporatist model of media and politics (D’Alessio, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2017; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2023), despite widespread accusations that there is a liberal bias (Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025; Watts et al., 1999). The situation is different for alternative media. As noted by Holt et al. (2019, p. 862), a defining feature of alternative media is that they “represent a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system.” As such and to the extent that traditional news media operate according to classic journalistic norms and values such as impartiality and neutrality, alternative media are – *ceteris paribus* – more likely to feature a more one-sided, partial coverage of politics and society and spread misinformation (Strömbäck, 2023).

More specifically and relative to traditional news media, alternative media are more likely to operate according to *propaganda feedback loops*. According to Benkler et al. (2018), typical for media that operate according to propaganda feedback loops is that political values (in a broad sense)

are more important than the veracity of information. Hence, they compete for audience attention mainly by offering information that aligns with and confirms the political identities that target audiences already have, rather than by providing verified and truthful information. Toward that end, they typically focus on issues important to those segments of the audience, deliver favourable coverage of actors and viewpoints that are close to their political orientation, and attack opponents not only in politics, but also for example media and academics that provide information that run counter to their framing of what's true (Benkler et al., 2018; Brems, 2023; Cushion, 2024; Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2021).

That said, not all alternative media are alike: both the degree of alternativeness and hostility toward traditional news media and other epistemic authorities varies (Brems, 2023; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022; Holt, 2020; Mayerhöffer, 2021). Consequently, there are differences both within and between types of alternative media, and with respect to the degree to which they spread misinformation. For example, in a comparative study, Staender et al. (2024) found four clusters of alternative media based on the degree to which they spread fabricated falsehoods, made false connections, and disseminated politically biased (mis)information: “mild distorters”, “heavy distorters”, “ideological misinformers”, and “extreme misinformers”. One should hence not draw all alternative media with the same brush.

THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF MEDIA HOSTILE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

While the above reasoning holds for all types of media, compared to traditional news media, different types of alternative media pose particular challenges to liberal democracy. There are several reasons for this. First, some of them operate (more or less) according to propaganda feedback loops (Benkler et al., 2018). For such alternative media, false and misleading information functions as weapons in their attempts to redefine what's true or sow doubt and undermine trust in their opponents – regardless of whether these are other political sides or epistemic authorities (Benkler et al., 2018; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2022). The key question for such media is not whether a piece of information is true, but rather whether it supports their political agenda and can be used to confirm their audience's political identities. If it does, it is embraced. If

not, attempts are made to disregard it or attack and sow mistrust in the piece of information or the source of the information.

Second, some alternative media are outright hostile toward liberal democracy, any or all of their core pillars, and/or key democratic norms and values such as political equality, tolerance and anti-violence. This holds in particular true for alternative media that are aligned with authoritarian populist political parties or movements, or that have even more extreme agendas. Importantly, such alternative media have become more prominent during the last decade (Benkler et al., 2018; Cushion, 2024; Heft et al., 2020, 2021), in parallel with the increasing prominence of radical right-wing, authoritarian, populist parties and leaders. Needless to say, such alternative media do not have a positive impact on liberal democracy. Instead, they function as anti-democratic propaganda vehicles even if they – quite similar to fake news sites – might have the appearance and trappings of traditional news media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Tandoc, 2019).

Third and related, hostility toward liberal democracy can take other forms beyond outspoken hostility or the dissemination of false and misleading information. Perhaps most importantly, both alternative media and social media are often sources and disseminators of illiberal and uncivil discourses, verbal aggressiveness, toxic language, and hateful speech (Åkerlund, 2022; Cicchirillo et al., 2015; Livingston & Miller, 2025; Sobieraj, 2020; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2026; Tirrell, 2017). This includes what Rossini (2022, p. 411) labels *intolerant discourse*, which refers to “messages that are harmful – for example, in the form of violent threats or harassment – or discriminatory toward people or groups based on personal characteristics, preferences, social status, and beliefs”. Examples include, among others, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and offensive stereotyping. Importantly, intolerant discourses must not be aggressive: they can also be expressed through humour and memes (Askanius, 2021). By using e.g., derogatory language, character assassination, misrepresentative exaggeration, ideologically extremizing language, and obscene language they “fan the flames of intolerance, promote and entrench polarisation, or create a generalized mistrust” of targeted groups (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 23).

Again, such discourses are problematic from a democratic perspective and fuel intolerance, hatred, and affective polarization, and erode democratic norms and values (Kingzette et al., 2021). In turn, it makes people more susceptible to misinformation (Jenke, 2023). As noted by Tirrell

(2017, p. 141), “toxicity creates and reinforces damage to both targets and communities”. This holds regardless of whether intolerant discourses are featured in the content of alternative media or in the comments sections, where even more hateful and fringe discourses often can be found. And it holds regardless of whether the underlying motives are political or rather commercial. The damage is the same.

CONCLUSION

While the analysis in this chapter is not exhaustive, it has identified several factors that are decisive for how media should be assessed from a liberal democratic perspective. A key aspect of our argument is that the same normative framework should be applied to both mainstream news media and alternative media. If the starting point is liberal democracy, the type of media should matter less than what kind of information they provide.

Beyond that, our core argument is that the most important aspect from a liberal democratic perspective is the extent to which media provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing, and that the ultimate characteristic of such information is that it gets as close to empirical truth as possible. That, in turn, requires that the media (a) verify all information and make sure that it corresponds to evidence, (b) make the distinction between facts and opinions clear, (c) prioritize facts over views, (d) verify that the substantial content in quotes and attributed statements from sources corresponds to evidence, (e) highlight whenever a source disseminates false and misleading information and provide information about what the best available evidence shows, (f) not equate balance with the kind of information people need when it pertains to factual matters, and (h) not provide false or misleading information either on the individual news-story level or by engaging in narrative persuasion.

That said, providing people with the kind of information they need to be free and self-governing is not all that matters. As suggested by our analysis, media also contributes to strengthening liberal democracy by supporting and defending democratic values and its core pillars, by functioning as watchdogs monitoring those in power; by enabling top-down, bottom-up and horizontal flows of information, by maintaining civil and tolerant discourses, and by providing topic diversity, source diversity, and viewpoint diversity.

Based on this, in the abstract, neither traditional news media nor alternative media help strengthen or weaken liberal democracy. In the end,

how they affect liberal democracy depends on the editorial processes and what kind of news and information they provide.

Having said that, extant research clearly suggests that traditional news media to a greater extent than alternative media live up to these standards, and that many alternative media are highly problematic from a normative liberal democratic perspective. At best, they support liberal democracy and function as complementary media that contribute to the flows of information and increase actor, topic, and viewpoint diversity, while also providing verified and truthful information. At worst, they are part of the larger political forces undermining democracy and contributing to democratic erosion.

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Critique Beyond the Status Quo: Alternative Media as Challengers of Social Power

Steffen Göths

INTRODUCTION: UNDER ONE UMBRELLA?

The term *alternative media* provokes many ideas and projections. As of today, there is no consensual definition of what makes a media outlet an alternative one. Rather, there is a “mass of theorizations and descriptions” (Rauch, 2014, p. 126). However, there is a common understanding that alternative media differ from mainstream media with regard to ideology, production routines and logic, as well as ownerships (Aharoni, 2023). Alternative media may question dominant epistemologies, provide different approaches of knowledge constructions (Sharma, 2022), and address issues of special interest not covered by mainstream media (Aharoni, 2023). However, what constitutes an issue of general or special interest and how mainstream media are defined remains vague. Scientific efforts for systematic comparison and categorization of media outlets as either mainstream or alternative fall short due to the blurring boundaries and practices of mutual observation between outlets (Aharoni, 2023; Atkinson, 2019; Holt & Haller, 2017). Despite these blurred lines between

S. Göths (✉)

Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Freie Universität,
Berlin, Germany

e-mail: steffen.goeths@fu-berlin.de

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_4

alternative and mainstream media, the categorization might still lead to a public perception of the phenomena as homogenous and therefore to a construction of two “opposing blocks” (Schwarzenegger, 2021, p. 100). Rather, the relation between alternative and mainstream media can be understood as a spectrum (Holt et al., 2019; Kenix, 2019). Still, differences can be found: Media audiences will perceive media as alternative, and alternative media are aiming for idealistic goals rather than just for higher circulation and, thus, revenues (Rauch, 2016, pp. 762–764). However, audiences’ perceptions of alternativity might not be based on a theoretical approach but on a heuristic that takes the styles and proclaimed *otherness* of media into account – despite their actual role within society.¹

Considering this vagueness, it is scientifically warranted to find a definition that covers the characteristics of the phenomenon. One way to arrive at such a definition would be to address the links of alternative media to social movements (Downing, 2001; Harlow, 2019). Like social movements, alternative media are often understood as something inherently progressive – although that understanding is a romanticization (Schwarzenegger, 2021). Social movements aim for social change. This change can be progressive as it might improve civil and human rights. However, change can also be for the worse, as far-right social movements are based on ideologies of social inequality (or group-focused enmity, as called by Zick et al. (2008)). The social change they aim for would mean the limitation of such rights.

Since far-right movements are also affiliated with media outlets, there is a growing number of studies on so-called far-right alternative media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Heft et al., 2020; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022; Schwarzenegger, 2023). While these studies are usually conducted within the context of media systems in Western democracies, works on alternative media in authoritarian countries rather stick to the idea of alternative media as agents for emancipatory change (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2021; Tshabangu & Salawu, 2022). The supposed rise of far-right alternative media gave way to an explicitly non-normative definition that understands alternative media as a “non-ideological umbrella term” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862) and aims to cope with the “implicit normative perception” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862) of the term. It has to be stated here that there occurred “a discursive hijacking of the ‘alternative nomenclature’” (Rae,

¹ In a loose comparison, one might consider music acts alternative that are actually deeply rooted within the rules of today’s music industry – because of their looks or styles of music.

2021, pp. 1124–1125), especially from the political right. Therefore, not all media which label themselves as alternative might actually be alternatives.

Hence, a normative point of view is necessary because a neutral position does not align with the social responsibility of science when dealing with far-right attitudes and actions. Already the definition of far-right is normative as it is based on ideologies of social inequality and the term itself comes with political connotations that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the social sciences – including Media and Communication Studies – are inherently normative as they make assumptions about society and its fundamental shapeability – whether consciously through criticism or unconsciously through acceptance of the given (Swedberg, 2014). A broad umbrella term might obscure the many differences between the media which are included in the category. Instead, the proposed concept of alternative media will be based on an understanding of social power (Venema, 2024). Thus, alternative media can be understood through their role within structures of social power.

The chapter discusses the meaning of the term *alternative*. This will be done from a perspective of Critical Theory which will be defined and contrasted with Critical Rationalism as hegemonic epistemology in Media and Communication Studies (Löblich, 2010; Potter et al., 1993; Tomaselli, 2005).² Afterwards, key concepts such as alternativity, opposition, and critique will be discussed. Finally, a dialectical approach will be presented that can be used for further research on the subject. The approach will take into account the critique towards non-normative approaches while also acknowledging their merits and reconcile them with normative ideas.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Different epistemological stances will lead to different understandings of research subjects (Göths & Milzner, 2024).³ In the social sciences, the epistemologies are usually not explicitly reflected in research articles. However, this is not only an academic or philosophical issue, but it has a substantial impact on research. Which kind of epistemologies are used or

² Unfortunately, the work on emerging paradigms in the field is rather limited. Potter et al. (1993, p. 328) show how the quantitative paradigm became more influential over time, while the hermeneutic paradigm waned.

³ On the assessment from the perspective of different models of democracy, see Chap. 2.

can be considered dominant is also not a purely academic question. On the contrary, epistemologies are political and subject of institutional struggles (Löblich, 2010; Scheu, 2012). They reflect different ideas of society and democracy and will thus define different aspects as either problematic or useful. However, the dominance of an epistemology does not necessarily lead to the vanishment of all other approaches. The differences between the alternative critical-normative approach and the hegemonic empirical-analytic approach will be summarized below.

Critical Theory as a Scientific Approach

The understanding of Critical Theory in this chapter is based on the seminal article of Max Horkheimer on Traditional and Critical Theory. Horkheimer's key argument can be summarized as follows: While traditional theory tries to deliver a concise description of the world (1937, pp. 245–247), critical theory does not take the current status quo for granted but as subject for change (1937, p. 261). Moreover, Critical Theory does not only see the potential for fundamental changes in societies, but the necessity for such changes. It accounts for the interdependencies between science and society and how scientific work is shaped by social structures (Hampe, 2009, p. 354).

Critical Theory takes a political standpoint and argues for social emancipation from power relations, while taking into account that science itself is entangled in these relations (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 263). Power relations are understood not as singular interdependencies between individuals but as rooted in the very structures of society that might be invisible to those affected by them (Marx, 1974, p. 88). In that notion, today's societies are still structured by power relations as racism, sexism, and also capitalism. This understanding goes beyond discrimination as an individual experience but focusses the societal roots of these experiences – although individual actions play their role in challenging or affirming these power relations (Sewell, 1992). Therefore, critique in the sense of Critical Theory is not an internal criticism towards methods and instruments, but a fundamental critique of the society itself (Scheu, 2012).

Regarding the definition of alternative media, a critical approach focuses the phenomenon not only within a certain media system but aims to understand its social meaning beyond this context. Society is understood as inherently structured by power. As there is no outside of society, individuals, academics as well as journalists, are part of these structures and

(involuntarily) reproduce them through everyday routines (Medearis, 2015, p. 136). A critical approach makes these structures visible and criticisable. Furthermore, this approach takes into account how societal norms and biases lead to subconscious assumptions about research objects.

Hidden Normativity in Critical Rationalism

Since Media and Communication Studies are dominated by the epistemological approach of Critical Rationalism, its ideas have a massive influence on a wide range of the field's research. Therefore, its stance towards normative values shall also be addressed here. Although it is often claimed that Critical Rationalism is non-normative and value-neutral, one should be aware that theories about society necessarily "have a political-ethical dimension, [as] they take certain features of society and human nature for granted" (Swedberg, 2014, p. 223). Karl Popper, as the founding father of Critical Rationalism, was a vivid advocate for liberal democracy, as for instance in his seminal work *Open Society and its Enemies* (2020) where he argues against traditions in philosophy that he calls authoritarian, as for instance Marxism.

Despite that explicit normative standpoint, Popper argued against using social values such as equality or justice in research. Instead, scientific values should be used (as simplicity or truth) (Popper, 1969, p. 114). Critique should be limited towards the research itself and be focussed on refuting hypotheses. The critique within academia should ensure that only his proposed scientific values are used within scientific work. The Critical Theory's broader approach of social critique as purpose of the social sciences has been refuted by Popper as non-scientific, leading to the dispute on positivism (Adorno et al., 1969). However, it remains unclear how Critical Rationalism accounts for the role of science within society and science's entanglements with social norms and power structures.

On the Relations Between Critical Theory and Critical Rationalism

As discussed above, research based on the epistemological assumptions of Critical Rationalism might fall short in regard to the societal aspects of its research objects. However, also Critical Theory comes with limitations, especially with regard to empirical applications on the meso- and the micro-level. On these levels, "*theories of middle range*" (Merton, 1967,

p. 43, emphasis in original) might be of better use, as it is possible to test them empirically, whereas theories of society are not subjectable to empirical testing. The differences between both approaches do not render them mutually exclusive. Rather, theories of society can offer a kind of interpretational backdrop for empirical results from research employing theories of middle range (Merton, 1967, p. 68).

With regard to the subject of this chapter, it would be possible to employ empirical research on different actors within a chosen media system and to explore their relationship with each other. That would be one of the advantages of the non-normative approach. Critical Theory might help not only to interpret the empirical results with regard to their role within society, but also to reflect on the assumptions that the research is grounded on.

KEY CONCEPTS

Alternative media as a concept is loaded with normative ideas, such as being inherently progressive, emancipatory, critical, et cetera (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861; Schwarzenegger, 2023, p. 853). Therefore, it seems useful to go back to its definitory core. Thus, three key concepts were chosen for a deeper analysis: *Alternativity*, as it the defining part of the term; *opposition*, as alternative media and social movements are often associated with counterpublics (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015, p. 368); and *critique*, as forms of social divergence might hold a potential to be critical towards social norms and structures. All three concepts have in common that they are used in order to describe a similar set of media outlets. As mentioned above, the concepts will be discussed through the lens of Critical Theory.

Alternativity

The question of what an alternative is has been raised not only since the establishment of the infamous term of *alternative facts* or the success of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) [Alternative for Germany]. Besides the AfD, there are and have been further conservative and right-wing parties calling themselves alternative in Italy, Serbia, and Slovakia. But also left-wing or liberal parties are or have been using Alternative as (part of) their name, as *Alternativet* [The Alternative] in

Denmark, but as well in countries like Austria, Finland, or, again, Italy.⁴ The alleged absence of alternatives was often used to immunize policies against criticism by politicians. Denying the existence of any alternative renders critique almost impossible, as providing alternative solutions is regularly demanded from critics. Thus, alternatives include two promises in social contexts:

1. There is more than one option.
2. The proposed option can be criticized by proposing another option.

Despite its ubiquity, *alternativity* is rarely defined, but “remains a contested concept – a ‘floating’ and ‘empty’ signifier that takes meaning within specific systems of interpretation” (Waisbord, 2022, p. 1432). Consequently, it is often used to loosely mark something as *different*. Instead of simply acknowledging the term’s ambiguity, a more pronounced definition of the term will be used here. From a critical perspective, alternatives act as critique of the status quo (Garaudy, 1973). Alternatives can be understood as not only diverging from the status quo but as explicitly against the status quo (Hollstein, 1981). Therefore, an analysis of the status quo is a premise to any alternative. Only from such an analysis one can argue what might be the root cause of perceived problems and develop an alternative that addresses that cause. With regard to media, alternativity can be understood as divergence from what is considered the hegemonial public sphere. Alternativity might function as verbalization of dissent but also of voices that are less heard than others (Hauser et al., 2019). Within the media system, alternativity is widely understood in three dimensions: “(1) alternative content, (2) interpretative strategies of audiences, and/or (3) alternative production” (Atkinson, 2010, p. 22; see also Hájek & Carpentier, 2015).

In conclusion, the alternativity of alternative media can be understood on two different levels. First, media outlets understand themselves as an alternative to established ways of journalistic production (see also Chap. 5). They try to achieve media coverage for unseen communities or try to circumvent the application of standardized news values. Second, media outlets develop alternatives to the status quo of society itself. Both practices might occur simultaneously, but this is not a necessity. From a

⁴All information on the parties’ positions according to the Party Manifesto Project by Lehmann et al. (2024).

perspective of Critical Theory, an alternative would need to do more than add one more facet to the public sphere. It would need to criticize the production of the public sphere and to reflect one's own role in that process.

Opposition

Although the idea of alternative media as oppositional has been criticized for its conceptional shortcomings (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015), it seems to be useful to discuss the concept of opposition in order to determine whether or not the term can be used to describe a part of the spectrum of alternative media. A rather narrow definition of opposition understands it as parties or factions in a parliament which do not align with the government. Opposition's democratic function includes criticising and controlling the government (Höreth & Ketelhut, 2020, p. 95). As such a definition is strongly tied to the study of polity, its usefulness to properly understand alternative media is debatable, despite media's role as the fourth power in democratic societies.

In a more fundamental sense, opposition means questioning the status quo of a society, thus creating the potential for social change. During the industrialization, the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat served as a facilitator for social change, with the proletariat in the role of the opposition. Modern capitalist societies (i.e. Western countries) are characterized by a transformation of the two classes, where "[an] overriding interest in the preservation and improvement of the institutional status quo unites the former antagonists in the most advanced areas of contemporary society" (Marcuse, 1964, p. xiii). In other words, modern capitalism has integrated the most important oppositional force into its functions and operations. In Marcuse's perspective, that integration leaves society without an opposition. This state, where elections are held but the fundamental political and economic structures are not to be questioned and liberal democracy has actually become the definition of democracy, can also be called a post-democracy (Crouch, 2004). When opposition is defined as an alternative to the status quo, the term alternative media should be reserved to media which are acting oppositional. This was already conceptualized as opposing the capitalist logic of revenue and labour exploitation through applying different forms of media production (Fuchs, 2010, p. 178). Although that conception offers an important insight as it addresses the fundamental principles of modern societies, it

does seem rather economic. Instead, oppositional media could be understood as actively addressing different phenomena of social power relations and contributing to abolish these power relations. Such contributions are achieved by critique.

Critique

Critique can be understood as a common human action. It includes the evaluation of situations, behaviour, and social norms and judges these things against their potential alternatives (Jaeggi & Wesche, 2009, p. 7). Critique is therefore only possible, when there are alternatives to the status quo or when alternatives are at least imaginable. Fundamentally, critique is a means to question the status quo. Therefore, science also can be a form of critique as it is able to question the knowledge of its time (Hampe, 2009, p. 355). But science does not necessarily have to fulfil that potential. Whether or not it functions as critique depends, again, on its epistemology.

The idea of critique in Critical Theory is to acknowledge that society is a product of human actions and therefore can be changed by human actions (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 261). As it asks about the societal possibilities for critique, and whether and how it can be voiced, Critical Theory acts as a form of *Meta-Critique* (Celikates, 2008, p. 184). From that point of view, one should not take the structures of society for granted or just a background for research. Rather, a research object needs to be understood as produced by a certain social reality. Critical Theory understands critique not only as a necessary precondition for social change but as ultimately directed towards social emancipation (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 263). While Critical Rationalism claims to be critical, too, its criticism remains immanent towards the social system in which academia is positioned. Therefore, Critical Rationalism is not a form of social critique but an affirmation of the status quo (Scheu, 2012, p. 80).

When critique is understood as means to make alternatives imaginable and therefore possible, alternative media need to act as critical actors within and against the (media) system. A critical perspective would not only discuss biases or problems in journalistic media but also question the very procedures of journalism and its ties within societal power structures. This has consequences for what kind of media outlets can be understood as alternative media. The aforementioned umbrella term of alternative media focusses the relation of self-ascribed alternative towards legacy

media, allowing to “[accommodate] alternative news media inspired by diverse political [...], religious [...] or philosophical [...] ideologies” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 866). In that understanding, the perspective of a media outlet regarding social power is not relevant to the categorization as alternative media. But if critique is understood as serving the purpose of emancipation, far-right alternative media seem to be rather oxymoronic, although there is of course a long tradition of right-wing and far-right media (Bhat & Vasudevan, 2019, p. 48).

The concepts discussed above are heavily intertwined. Critique is a prerequisite of alternatives and therefore opposition. Alternatives are essentially a form of critique as they uncover the possibility of social change. But also, alternatives have to be imaginable, so that critique can be formulated and voiced. Finally, opposition is a fundamental critique that argues for a fundamental alternative to the status quo. Since Critical Theory is arguing for an overall social emancipation from power, that alternative would question the fundamentals societies are built on. That is also an important difference to the concept of *anti-systemness* that covers any fundamental contestation of the status quo (Henriksen, 2024; Holt, 2018). Here, ideologies which strive to abolish the achieved social emancipations might fall in the same category as those arguing for radical emancipation.

Therefore, from a perspective of Critical Theory, the concept of alternative media is demanding difficult requisitions to be met. It is more than calling oneself an alternative. It is about striving to actually be an alternative and advocate for social emancipation. That would exclude media publishing anti-emancipatory ideologies as well as state-backed media.

A DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

This chapter discussed the question of what makes alternative media actually alternative. The answer to that question depends on two decisions: (1) Which epistemology is used and (2) what is the context in which a particular media outlet is acting as an alternative. If research is focussing on the relations between media outlets which differ in terms of partisanship, journalistic standards, or ways of production, the sole context of the media system might be sufficient. When social power is excluded from the equation, more media outlets might seem alternative, as they do diverge from what is understood as legacy media. In this sense, alternativity might include different perspectives on society, different working routines, or focusing on niches not covered by journalistic media. Contrary to Critical

Theory, such research is not necessarily grounded in a theory of society, such as Liberalism, Marxism, or Feminism, but rather builds on theories of middle range. With that epistemological stance, using the self-labelling of media outlets in order to categorize them, seems comprehensible.

But if an approach is used that includes media as part of social structures and therefore as part of social power relations, the term alternative means something more fundamental. Following Marcuse's idea of opposition, alternative media would not only diverge from journalistic routines but question the status quo on a societal level. Such alternative media would provide an analysis of power relations, criticize them and understand themselves as means to social emancipation. Obviously, criteria for this categorization are rather strict and it is unlikely that many media outlets will meet these criteria, especially when the constraints and affordances of capitalist media markets are considered (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p. 146). Therefore, it seems useful to not understand the criteria as distinct categories but rather a spectrum on which media can be positioned. This understanding leads to three consequences:

1. *Alternative media must be defined based on their contents rather than based on self-labels or ways of circulation.* Questioning social power relations might coincide with certain styles of media production. But that is not a necessity. Simultaneously, proclaiming oneself as an alternative does not necessarily mean opposing social power. In contrast, some of these self-proclaimed alternatives are actually (re-)enforcing social power relations (see Chap. 3 for a similar conclusion from the perspective of liberal democracy.)
2. *If opposition and divergence are considered a vital part of democracy as they challenge those in power, alternative media are not only desirable as a sign of multi-perspectivity or freedom of expression.* Alternative media as challengers of social power would be the necessary vocalisation of critique and disagreement that might lead to a further social democratization (see also Chaps. 6 and 7).
3. *In order to be able to achieve social change, alternative media would need to be a part of social movements or at least have ties to such a movement.* Social change is possible only through organization and collective action. Voicing critique might be a necessary step but it is not sufficient (see also Chap. 9).

Conclusively, alternative media should not be used as an umbrella term for every diversion within the media system, but as a careful categorization for specific media outlets. The proposed definition would allow to include a wide range of media outlets and discuss them with regard to their emancipatory potential. That might result in findings where media outlets perceived as progressive actually align with anti-emancipatory ideologies – despite the self-chosen label (Freudenthaler, 2020).

Simultaneously, media outlets with ties to far-right actors are excluded from the definition, as their ultimate aim is against any form of emancipation and to enforce societal power structures. This includes the delegitimization of contrary positions, thus opposing the idea of critical, democratic discourse (Freudenthaler, 2020). They act as exact opposite of what Critical Theory defines as alternative or opposition. To call them alternative media despite their actual ideologies would in a way verify their self-staging as true alternatives to the status quo (Venema, 2024). Instead, the concept of hyperpartisan media (Rae, 2021) might be a better approach to them.

Taken into account how different types of media converge, research could ask for the stances towards emancipation within media perceived as legacy or mainstream media. Since ideologies of social inequality are not limited to so-called societal fringes but are widespread, it would be a mistake to look for them only outside the media system's centre. That would allow to draw a clearer picture of today's journalism and its societal role.

As supposed by Critical Theory, a reflection on unconscious assumptions as well as on possible consequences of our research is necessary. For instance, the idea of liberal democracy might have been internalized to an extent where every contestation of this form of democracy seems to be a threat to democracy itself – even if the contestation is brought forward in order to further democratize society. A lack of differentiation might not only discredit alternative media as challengers within the media system, but the whole idea of alternativity and opposition. Ultimately, it would render social change and progress impossible.

Nevertheless, and in order to reconcile different approaches on alternative media, it is necessary to evaluate one's conceptualizations of research objects with regard to the actual research question. If one is interested in the dynamics between different media outlets within in the media system, an empirical-relational approach as proposed by Holt et al. (2019) is useful since macro-level theories as Critical Theory are often difficult to operationalize on a meso- or micro-level. For instance, studies might cover the

dynamics between media actors through variations of Bourdieu's field theory, based on the distribution and accumulation of field-specific capital (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024; Maares & Hanusch, 2023). General power structures could be considered within such an approach as influences on the capital distribution. Therefore, a combination of these contributions with general theories of society might deliver a thorough analysis of the role of media within the structures of societies.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their constructive and encouraging feedback on the first draft of this chapter. I would also like to thank Miriam Milzner and Hannah Hartmuth for our inspiring discussions on the chapter's subject and Vivien Benert for her careful reading of the initial manuscript.

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Performing Alternativeness: An Intermedial Approach to Alternative Media

Beate Schirrmacher and Kristoffer Holt

INTRODUCTION

Alternative media are often framed in terms of its opposition to mainstream journalism—grassroots versus establishment, the people versus the elite (Frischlich et al., 2023; Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Fuchs, 2010; Kenix, 2015, Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015). Yet, in practice, these boundaries between the alternatives and their counterparts are porous. Alternative media do not exist outside the media system but inter-act continuously with the logics, technologies, and audiences shaped by it. The concept of *media logic* has long been central to understanding how conventions, routines, and technological affordances shape content and communication in the mainstream media (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Altheide, 2016). Media logic generally refers to the norms, formats, and routines through which media produce and present content, shaping both communication processes and public perception; in the context of this chapter, it also highlights how these conventions are not only reproduced in mainstream

B. Schirrmacher (✉)

Department of Film and Literature, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
e-mail: beate.schirrmacher@lnu.se

K. Holt

Department of Media and Journalism, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_5

journalism but are actively contested, adapted, and transformed by alternative media. This chapter argues that to understand how alternativeness is per-formed across platforms and genres, we need an intermedial approach—one that traces how different actors use shared media resources in divergent ways to signal ideological distinction and challenge mainstream narratives.

Altheide and Snow (1979) doubted the possibility of genuine alternative meaning-making in the face of dominant media logic, arguing that “counterestablishment and unofficial statements on the meaning of various events [are] thwarted or at least altered through the application of existing media logic” (p. 244). This reflected the centralized and hierarchical media landscape of the late twentieth century, in which powerful institutions exerted considerable gatekeeping control. Today’s hybrid and net-worked media environment presents a different configuration. Digital infrastructures and social platforms have enabled the rise of actors who not only operate outside legacy journalism but also define themselves explicitly in opposition to it. Alternative media derive rhetorical and symbolic power from contesting what they frame as hegemonic mainstream media logic. Importantly, they do not attempt to escape that logic; rather, they operate under the assumption of its power, engage with it—responding, reinterpreting, and often repurposing its formats, genres, and strategies. This ongoing and adaptive engagement constitutes what we can call alternative media logic: a dynamic, performative set of practices that both depend on and challenge the presence and influence of mainstream media within the broader hybrid media system.

Since its original formulation by Altheide and Snow, the concept of media logic has undergone significant development and critique. Scholars have refined the concept to account for institutional variation—e.g., news logics (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) and commercial news logic, which foregrounds economic pressures on editorial decisions (Karidi, 2017). In response to the digital turn, others have proposed new frameworks such as network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, 2024), emphasizing interactivity, decentralization, and algorithmic mediation, and audience logics (Blassnig & Esser, 2021), which focus on how user preferences shape content production and visibility. Brants and van Praag (2015) suggest that media logic might be redundant as a concept in light of increased participatory features of digital media. The concept has been criticized for its broadness and lack of analytical precision (Coudry & Hepp, 2017). Lundby (2009) and Hjarvard (2018) argue that media logic requires

greater contextual and actor-sensitive nuance. As with mediatization, it is important to avoid adopting a view on media logic that has a ‘media-centric’ focus (Hepp et al., 2015; Livingstone, 2009), while still acknowledging the importance of media in social, political, and cultural processes. These concerns are particularly relevant when analyzing alternative media, which operate within—but also contest—dominant institutional, technological, and audience-driven logics.

Our aim in introducing alternative media logic is not to propose a fixed or entirely separate logic, but to recognize the patterned ways in which alternative actors adapt, resist, and reconfigure dominant conventions. As Hjarvard (2018) suggests, media logics are most usefully examined at a ‘middle-range’ level, general enough to support theorisation, but specific enough to account for empirical variation. In line with this, we argue that it makes conceptual sense to acknowledge that the media logic shaping alternative media will necessarily diverge from the dominant logic it seeks to counter. However, understanding how this divergence is performed in practice requires detailed analysis of individual cases—examining rhetorical strategies, aesthetic choices, technological affordances, and contextual motivations. To that end, we propose an intermedial approach to studying alternative media. This approach helps capture the hybrid, fluid, and performative dimensions through which alternative actors negotiate and reshape multiple, sometimes competing, media logics in today’s digital public sphere. The emergence of digital and social media further complicates an approach to alternative media and their logics: Social media platforms simultaneously provide alternatives to traditional mass media while also being deeply integrated into broader media ecologies (Taffel, 2019). Social media platforms, for instance, serve as both an alternative space for a plethora of alternative voices and a site where mainstream media actors exert influence at the same time (see also Chap. 1 in this book). This paradox necessitates an analytical perspective that captures the interplay between mass and social media, and between mainstream and alternative news outlets.

This chapter contributes to the debate on alternative media by adopting an intermedial perspective, exploring relationships between different media and their interdependencies (Jensen, 2016; Helles, 2013). Intermedial analysis allows scholars to trace similarities across different media types and analyse how meaning is constructed through their intersections. While mainstream journalism, social media influencers, and alternative media actors all engage with similar technological and semiotic

resources, their communicative strategies, ideological frameworks, and rhetorical practices often vary significantly (See Chap. 4 in this book for an interesting critical discussion on ideologies and alternative media). Intermedial analysis provides methodological tools for investigating how different actors utilize the same digital infra-structures in divergent ways (Holt & Schirrmacher, 2022). This intermedial perspective allows us to explore the performative aspects of alternative media logic. By examining how alternative media navigate and transcend the boundaries between various media forms, we can gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which they operate, challenge, and reshape dominant media narratives. In the following discussion, we highlight how an intermedial perspective helps us grasp the complexities and intersections of different media logics. Drawing on Elleström's intermedial concepts, we will analyse how alternative actors repurpose common communicative resources, technologies, and genres. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for unpacking what we refer to in this chapter as the performativity of 'alternativeness' (Holt et al., 2019) and the ways in which it is enacted across various platforms.

THE DIVERSITY AND PREDICTABILITY OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Alternative media, positioned against mainstream media, develop distinct logics of production, dissemination, and reception through opposition to dominant media structures, critiquing journalistic authority, challenging mainstream narratives, and offering counter-discourses (Holt et al., 2019). Alternativeness is therefore to some extent performative, and the oppositional/corrective stance towards mainstream media suggests a certain amount of predictability of the performance. The performance of alternativeness includes a set of practices that differentiate these outlets from mainstream journalism but also shape their audience engagement and claims to credibility in a way that could be described as an alternative kind of media logic.

Alternative media challenge mainstream norms, often by emphasizing activism and ideological perspectives, prioritizing interpretive storytelling over traditional objectivity (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). They operate with decentralized structures, relying on grassroots networks, citizen journalism, and digital-first strategies, thus bypassing traditional gatekeeping and

reaching audiences directly (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016). This fosters legitimacy among underrepresented audiences, cultivating engaged communities by positioning themselves as platforms for marginalized voices (See Chaps. 11 and 12 for perspectives on investigating alternative news use and understanding the perspectives of the audience).

A defining characteristic of alternative media is their self-referential critique of mainstream journalism. This critique is not only expressed in content but also in the performative aspects of alternative media production, where dissent against mainstream narratives becomes central to their identity. While these dimensions can be performed very differently, they highlight the fluidity of alternative media logic. Most importantly, as alternative media claim to offer an alternative to the mainstream they are fundamentally interrelated (Holt, 2023). On one level, the perception of mainstream and alternative media is founded on a binary opposition. Both are defined by their opposite, and emphasizing their differences is part of their boundary work (Seuri & Toivanen, 2021). At the same time, they share some fundamental similarities: both types of media provide news and views on recent events. And when we look closer, what is called mainstream in relation to alternative media spans a wide range (Rauch, 2023; Steppat et al., 2023). Recent studies suggest how even alternative media are by no means monolithic but vary depending on ideological orientation, platform dependence, and audience expectations. Alternative stances to the mainstream can be performed differently. For example, right-wing alternative media often perform populist critiques of journalism, portraying themselves as the voice of “the people” against media elites (Holt, 2023). Conversely, left-wing and grassroots media express an alternative to established communication patterns in the public sphere and may emphasize participatory democracy and community-driven storytelling (Atton, 2015; Fuchs, 2010). They oppose dominant media structures with a certain predictability and at the same time they draw on a variety of digital affordances, integrating journalism, video aesthetics, meme culture, podcasting, and interactive content in fluid ways. Alternative media present news and views in a way that is both similar and different from mainstream news media. Thus, their performance is not only informed by a predictable alternative opposition to the mainstream but also their logic is informed by the mainstream journalism they rhetorically oppose. An approach to alternative media logic must address the interplay of similarities between different but related media types. Ultimately, the study of alternative

media logic requires an approach that accounts for its relational, dynamic, and contested nature.

AN INTERMEDIAL APPROACH TO ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

How can we analytically approach the diverse, fluid and yet predictable performance of alternative media? While the concept of hybridity (Chadwick, 2017) helps to move beyond binaries and stable systems, it does not provide a clear framework for analysing the complex interplay of continuities and differences, nor for identifying “the patterns amid apparent flux” (Witschge et al., 2019, p. 655). Both the predictable logic and the fluidity of alternative media are shaped by the way they oppose and adapt to other media types. To study this interplay, we employ an intermedial approach that explores the underlying similarities between different media types (Elleström, 2021, p. 5). Research in the humanities has used the concept of intermediality to approach the dynamic interplay in and between literature, visual art, music, theatre, or popular culture. This research developed methods and concepts to examine how media combine, transmediate and represent each other in phenomena such as film adaptations, transmedial story worlds, or graphic narration (Jensen, 2016; Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022). We argue that these methods are valuable for analysing the blurring boundaries that result from hybridization and convergence. An intermedial perspective identifies how technology shapes communication and provides tools to address transformation processes and merging across conventional boundaries. According to intermedial scholar Lars Elleström, media “can be thoroughly understood only in relation to other types of media with which they share basic features” (2021, p. 4).

In the following, we approach news as a “qualified media type” in Elleström’s sense, as a communicative genre formed by the material, sensorial and semiotic aspects of individual media products that are defined by their conventional use in specific social contexts (2021). The concept of a qualified media type helps us identify the shared basic features of “news” (Holt & Schirrmacher, 2022), as a communicative genre formed and shaped by conventions developed in professional journalism. With Elleström’s concepts of media types and modalities we can examine how new actors in the public sphere adapt these shared features of news in distinctly alternative ways. This approach allows us to address alternative media as diverse and predictable at the same time. We can relate

similarities and differences between alternative and mainstream media or explore the performance of alternativeness across actors and systems.

AN INTERMEDIAL APPROACH TO NEWS

As a communicative form designed to deliver information—an “informational account of happenings in the world” (Carlson, 2017, p. 40)—news has always been an integral part of human life. Still, news has changed over time, depending on whether it is shared in conversation, via postal systems, or through mass media. The ongoing digital transformation therefore also redefines the very concept of news itself (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Yet, a general understanding of news is still shaped by the experience of the products of professional journalism. This makes it difficult to pinpoint how new actors and a diversified public sphere redefine and expand the concept of news. The concept of a *qualified media type* (Elleström, 2021, pp. 54–65) captures how the prototypical understanding of media formats or genres is informed by the material objects (*technical media of display*) and a specific use of communicative resources (*basic media types*) according to *qualifying aspects* defined by function and conventions. Any particular media product perceived as “news” is shaped by the technical devices we interact with (such as screens or paper), that provide access to basic media types (such as texts or images) and that are shaped according to the *contextual and operational qualifying aspects* to inform and engage audiences about current events. Thus, we recognize a text-image integration on folded sheets of paper as a “news article” or a screened performance with certain roles and props, as “a news morning show”. These shared basic features of news (see Holt & Schirrmacher, 2022) are only a point of departure. The intermedial dynamics of similarities and differences between individual media products or specific news genres can be analysed further describing their *material, sensorial, spatio-temporal* and *semiotic modes*. These media modalities (Elleström, 2021, pp. 41–54) describe four dimensions of engagement that all media products share although in different modes. They allow us to distinguish between material interaction, sensorial perception, spatiotemporal aspects, and interpretation of signs and to trace how they inform each other.

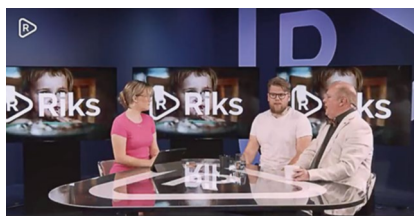
ALTERNATIVE NEWS: SHARED FEATURES AND DIFFERENT MODES

Let us demonstrate how this layered approach of shared features in different modes can be used to describe how alternative media products oppose and relate to mainstream media. As an empirical example, we examine the morning show *Morgongänget* (*The Morning Crew*), produced by the Swedish right-wing alternative media outlet *Riks*. While the example is context-specific, the framework we apply here is designed to be transferable across countries and media systems. *Riks* was launched in 2021 and has quickly become one of the most prominent Swedish digital platforms aligned with right-wing populism. Although it is formally independent, *Riks* maintains strong ideological, organizational, and personal ties to the right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats (SD). *Riks* positions itself as a counterforce to what it describes as a left-leaning mainstream media establishment, often framing itself as a “corrective” to journalistic bias (Ekman & Widholm, 2024). *Riks* publishes online only and offers a mix of recurring formats that blend news, commentary, satire, and ideological entertainment. *Morgongänget*, its weekday morning show, is among the most consistent formats, with over 660 episodes currently available on demand. While mainstream Swedish morning shows—such as *Morgonstudion* (SVT) and *Nyhetsmorgon* (TV4)—blend entertainment with a broad selection of news in extended multi-hour formats, *Morgongänget* is a compressed adaptation of the genre, each episode is between 20–40 min long and focuses on a smaller selection of—primarily domestic—news stories related to immigration, crime, energy policy, and cultural values and how they have been framed in mainstream Swedish media. The tone is informal and conversational, yet politically charged, often critiquing journalistic coverage for ideological bias. Thus, *Morgongänget* retains core conventions but applies them in a way that performs alternativeness. With Elleström’s concepts, we can grasp the interplay of similarities and opposition in a more nuanced way. First, we use the media types to structure the basic features that *Morgongänget* shares with mainstream morning shows:

- Technical media of display (layered interface: electronic screens mediate the performative space ‘studio’ (with desks, screens, sofas and persons)).

- Basic media types (body language and speech, texts, still and moving images, sounds).
- Qualifying aspects: the use of devices (e.g. screens) and performance of roles (e.g. presenter), of basic media-integrations recognizable as ‘headlines’, ‘news reports’ in a moderated discussion of recent events presented as current affairs.

Screenshots illustrate the shared basic features of alternative, public service, and private TV news morning shows (Fig. 5.1). A closer examination of any episode of *Morgongänget* reveals how these shared features manifest in specific interactive, perceptual, spatiotemporal, and semiotic modes. Although the studio setting resembles that of mainstream media, the platform’s channel interface allows for a flexible publishing schedule and variable episode lengths. It also encourages live user inter-action (comments), available in edited form even when watching the recorded version. The comments make user engagement with presented topics visible and create a sense of a present community. The studio discussion, featuring a female



(a). Morgongänget, Riks, 16 June 2023



(c). Morgonstudion, SVT



(b). Morgongänget, Riks, 12 February 2024



(d). Nyhetsmorgon, TV4, 2 October 2024

Fig. 5.1 Screenshots of news morning shows in alternative news (a, b), public service (c) and private television (d)

moderator and male commentators, rely on the basic media types of speech and body language. Texts and images of recent mainstream headlines appear primarily on users' devices (not the studio) screen. More recently, a short news survey (*Nyhetsvepet*) includes text-image integrations that represent news from *Riks'* own website. Still, the panel discussion focuses on current affairs through the presentation of mainstream media reports on these topics and a critical discussion of their framing. These characteristics are not specific for *Riks*, they overlap either with the content of other social media channels or mainstream journalism. And in addition, the specific design appears to be more fluid over time than one is used to from mainstream formats. Still, the way in which *Morgongänget* provides a site to engage with specific topics and meet a specific community, its primarily oral studio discussion of public affairs, presented through the lens of mainstream media and harshly criticized by in-house experts can be summed up as a distinctly alternative approach to the morning shows of mainstream journalism. In contrast, mainstream morning shows, even when accessed online, tend to primarily communicate one-to-many. The speech and body performances in the studio express formal professionalism and time efficiency, they are combined with complex, layered integrations of texts and images displayed on device or studio screens. Screens frequently mediate moving sounding images that represent a wide range of recent events, commented on by a mix of in-house journalists and invited experts. Thus, Elleström's framework helps identify characteristics that contribute to an alternative interpretation of a morning show, allows for tracking changes within *Morgongänget* over time as well as its relationship to other alternative media outlets.

THE INTERPLAY OF STANCE, SYSTEM AND STYLE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF ALTERNATIVENESS

Still, alternative news media are not the only actors who use digital networked communication with a distinct 'non-professional' style, or who present unconventional adaptations of previously professional-only formats. To understand how alternative news media products, as *Morgongänget*, perform news in a way that both overlaps with mainstream but still is perceived as alternative, we suggest to distinguish the different meanings of the word alternative: as (1) one of several options, (2) a position outside conventional systems or an (3) expression of unconventional

style, once again in order to trace how these different dimensions of alter-nativeness inform each other. Let us take a closer look at how an alterna-tive ideological stance, critical opposition to mainstream news coverage, alternative networks to mass media infra-structure and the alternative adaptation of journalistic formats can inform a performance of alter-nativeness.

Alternativeness is constructed in the boundary works of alternative *and* mainstream media, both claim to offer ‘better/real news’ and accuse each other of ideological bias (Eldridge II, 2025; Holt, 2023; Seuri & Toivanen, 2021). Yet the alternative, corrective stance of the other option (Holt et al., 2019), means that alternative media also need to construct their epistemic authority (Carlson, 2017) in opposition to mainstream journal-ism. Like mainstream journalism, alternative media construct their right to be listened to in relation to those in power and to its audience. Yet, whereas mainstream journalism invokes authority through claims to professional ethos and production, alternative media construct an authority that cor-responds to their alternative stance. As self-proclaimed watchdogs they claim authority as media critics (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). As counter-voices they do not need to establish professional distance and neutrality but engage in a less asymmetrical audience relationship. This stance is performed in the selection of topics and a focus on critical com-mentary of already reported events in *Riks Morgongänget*.

Digital networks facilitate reaching an audience for alternative expres-sions as they reduce the financial and professional barriers to publication. Yet, digital networks also change the dynamic between creators and their audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Online platforms provide content but are at the same time sites for meeting a community. Following what is termed social media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) or network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2024), online-only news products are designed for sharing within personalized networks, focusing on personal interest and maximizing attention. Consequently, the production of *Morgongänget* does not necessarily prioritize the professional standards that were formed for mass media distribution; instead, they establish alternative quality markers like flexible formats, authentic expression, and interaction between creators and followers.

Alternative stances, but also digital networks, are creating hybrid news media products. Both mainstream and alternative media adapt the formats developed for mass media communication to online networks and thus blend elements of mass media and networked media logic. While

mainstream journalism adapts professional practices and ethics to reach its audiences in a new way. Alternative actors adapt journalistic formats to borrow a professional legitimacy from journalism (Tsurriel et al., 2021; Carlson, 2017; Ekman & Widholm, 2024) but the media products of *Riks* perform news with an authority that is based on critical opposition towards mainstream news discourse and designed to reach online audiences.

Distinguishing between these levels helps separate general shifts in public communication from the specific ways alternative media build audience relationships, redefine professional values, and adapt journalistic formats. By focusing on domestic topics, they adopt a critical stance, highlighting mainstream coverage that they claim requires reinterpretation. Their use of digital networks favours authenticity over professionalism, aligning with networked media logic while also performing an alternative claim to authority and a different kind of audience connection. For instance, in the specific alternative adaptation of *Morgongänget*, the studio screens are not used for representing news events but are often used for self-reference—or omitted altogether. Instead, digital video production relies more on device screens to project headlines and frame reinterpretations of mainstream news. Thus, alternative stances and alternative means of reaching your audience inform each other and shape the hybrid media products that explicitly relate to and oppose mainstream at the same time. While new forms of public voices, novel dissemination strategies, and digital-born media types are by no means unique to alternative media, their interplay in alternative news production offers distinct ways of challenging mainstream journalistic norms.

CONCLUSION

To fully grasp the specificity of alternative media, it is useful to go beyond structural and institutional analyses to examine the performative dimensions of “alternativeness” (Holt et al., 2019). Our intermedial approach highlights how alternative media not only position themselves rhetorically against the mainstream but performatively construct their distinctiveness through stylistic and technological means. Drawing on Elleström’s framework we identified shared basic features of news media which alternative media adapts in a way that both relates and opposes the mainstream, exploits the affordances of networked communication to reach their audience and adapt journalist formats to an alternative stance and online networks. This process unfolds across editorial practices, audience engagement,

aesthetic choices, and platform strategies, shaping the performance of alternativeness. The intermedial perspective that distinguishes different layers in order to better describe how they shape and depend on each other, helps to describe the media specificity of alternative media. While alternative and mainstream media rhetorically oppose each other, this is only one aspect of a multi-layered intermedial relationship. An intermedial perspective can disentangle this contradictory hybridity of alternative media products. These adaptations both draw on journalistic formats and question journalistic authority, they construct their right to be listened to with a performance of authenticity and community which creates a hybrid stance that blurs the distinctions between journalism and activism. Alternative media critique legacy journalism for biases but also reconfigure its conventions. The intermedial comparison between distinctly different but related media types can help to understand how central aspects of alternativeness are performed differently, at different times, in different media systems, both in relation to mainstream journalism or other new digital actors, as an interplay of predictability and fluidity. We perceive a logic that is not only defined by technology but that can be grasped in tracing multiple intermedial relationships.

The intermedial comparison also draws attention to how the experimental and participatory dimensions of alternative media blend the adaptation of journalistic formats with digital culture, such as video aesthetics, meme culture, podcasting, and interactive content. They navigate platform logics to optimize content visibility and cultivate community identities (Müller & Schulz, 2021). But unlike mainstream news providers, who often maintain control over comment sections and participatory elements, alternative news media tend to anticipate and rely on social network activity and engagement for circulation (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2025). This opens up for participatory dynamics in a different way than more mainstream outlets. Thus, alternative media do not only present themselves as counter media in opposition to mainstream journalism but are part of digital networked culture. The intermedial performativity of alternativeness thus extends to audience interactions and blurs the lines between journalism, activism, and entertainment, since participatory platforms allow audiences to co-construct narratives, reinforce ideological positions, and foster a sense of belonging. This intermedial engagement highlights how alternative media are not only sources of information but also cultural and political actors, challenging dominant media norms while simultaneously existing within them.

Furthermore, since alternative news often uses mainstream news pieces as a starting point for criticism, alternative news media not only disseminate their own perspectives but also recontextualize pieces of mainstream news in their social networks. In doing so, they do not merely operate within the media ecosystem—they actively reshape it. This reveals a complex form of intermedial media criticism, which demands further attention.

Analysing alternative media through an intermedial approach offers an important analytical tool to explore the mechanisms through which alternative media operate, critique, and reconfigure dominant narratives. Alternative media do not function in isolation but rather in dynamic interrelation with legacy journalism, social media platforms, and broader political and cultural movements. The intermedial study of alternative media reveals tensions within alternative media spheres. While presenting themselves as counter-hegemonic and independent, their reliance on digital infrastructures and audience engagement strategies embeds them in the same media ecologies as the institutions they critique, raising questions about whether they challenge or adapt existing media norms.

The intermedial performativity of alternativeness highlights fluid boundaries between media types. Alternative media borrow from mainstream conventions while reshaping them to fit ideological, aesthetic, and technological imperatives, complicating simplistic binaries and calling for detailed analyses of how they construct credibility and engage with audiences. Moreover, as alternative media gain influence, their role in shaping public discourse becomes increasingly significant. Their ability to challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative frameworks of interpretation presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, they contribute to media pluralism by amplifying diverse voices and fostering critical debate (Ihlebak et al., 2022). On the other hand, their susceptibility to ideological entrenchment, misinformation, and strategic manipulation raises concerns about their impact on public trust and democratic deliberation (Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025). Adopting intermedial perspectives helps us understand how alternative media challenge and contribute to the media ecosystem, shaping new forms of discourse and engagement. Future research should examine the long-term implications of alternative media logic in response to regulatory pressures, technological changes, platform governance, and audience demands.

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How Alternative Epistemic Authorities Evaluate the Foundations of Knowledge – and Challenge the Traditional Knowledge Order

Salla Tuomola

INTRODUCTION

In today's high-choice digital media environment, *alternative epistemic authorities* are actively shaping a landscape in which competing forms of knowledge strive for public attention, legitimacy, and power (see, e.g., Waisbord, 2018). These actors gain influence as content curators on social media, engaging with both alternative and mainstream media sources. Typically, such content curators encompass a diverse range of actors, including political figures, social media commentators, public discussion groups, and individual “hyper-tweeters” (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024, p. 92,

S. Tuomola (✉)

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere
University, Tampere, Finland
e-mail: stuomola@ruc.dk

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European
Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_6

quotation marks in original). In this chapter, a shared characteristic among alternative epistemic authorities is a low level of trust in, and a critical stance toward, mainstream media and other established knowledge sources. Their authority largely stems from substantial follower bases and the visibility afforded by platform algorithms. Examining the epistemic foundations of these emerging actors reveals what is at stake when traditional epistemic authorities are challenged. As influential figures, they play a key role in shaping agendas and discourse, particularly within alternative news spaces.

This shift prompts critical questions: Who is considered credible enough to serve as an epistemic authority? How and why have the foundational premises of epistemic legitimacy evolved – and what do they consist of today? This chapter explores how alternative epistemic authorities evaluate the credibility of knowledge claims and seek out trustworthy information. These alternative actors represent a heterogeneous group of individuals – alternative media producers, political content creators, critical authors, and social media influencers who identify as active and critical citizens, and, to some extent, challenge traditional epistemic knowledge production. While none of them aligns explicitly with conspiracy ideologies, they position themselves – drawing on Mayerhöffer et al. (2024) – as either corrective or complementary voices in relation to the dominant mediated public debate. They do so from a variety of political and ideological standpoints.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first introduces a theoretical perspective on epistemology: what it is, how journalism has traditionally been understood as an epistemic authority, and how emerging epistemic actors challenge these traditional roles – potentially leading to an epistemic crisis. The practices underlying the journalistic knowledge order are addressed only briefly, serving to highlight how perceptions of alternative epistemic authorities differ from those of journalists, the traditional “epistemic workers” (see Carlson, 2020).

The second part of the chapter takes an empirical standpoint to examine how alternative epistemic authorities assess the reliability of knowledge. The empirical examples are based on interview data collected from low-trust citizens, who primarily operate on various social media platforms and within several citizen activism initiatives in Finland. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to uncover the epistemic foundations that guide how these actors seek, evaluate, and disseminate knowledge. In doing so, it becomes possible to better understand how they position themselves as challengers to, and redefiners of, the traditional knowledge order.

EPISTEMOLOGY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Epistemology, as a theory of knowledge, encompasses the beliefs that members of the democratic public accept as true within political and social contexts (Kreiss, 2019, p. 225). At its core, epistemology involves the process of legitimizing certain types of information as knowledge in relation to others (Lewis & Westlund, 2015, p. 452). This chapter focuses on the social dimension of epistemology, which Goldman (1999, p. 4) defines as a field that emerges through interactions among individuals along social pathways to knowledge. This dimension also emphasizes the role of group identities, such as voters, co-workers, or entire societies, and examines how specific types of information are disseminated within these groups. Furthermore, social epistemology extends beyond individual epistemic beliefs to include those held by collective or corporate entities (Goldman, 1999). Ekström (2002) contends that epistemologies are formulated and applied across all social practices involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Collectively, these elements – the interaction along social pathways, the distribution of knowledge within broader social groups, and engagement in shared practices – constitute the social dimension of epistemology (Ekström, 2002), which is central to the empirical analysis presented in this chapter.

In today's hybrid media environment, nearly anyone can produce and disseminate information – often in ways that serve their own interests (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Chadwick, 2017). Within this context, epistemic authority can be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, emerging in relation to others, while knowledge itself is shaped through the interaction between information providers and their audiences, forming what Goldman (2011, p. 18) calls an “epistemic system.” Epistemic authority is conceived as the capacity to produce legitimate knowledge and have it acknowledged as such by others (Gieryn, 1999). This relationship hinges on the trust individuals place in the beliefs of the epistemic authority (Zagzebski, 2012).

In other words, epistemic authority is grounded in the trust and loyalty of those who believe in the authority's superior ability to gather and verify information. The audience's epistemic beliefs play a crucial role, as epistemic authorities derive their value from the recognition granted by followers – those who assign authority to individuals they believe are better equipped to assess the relevance and reliability of knowledge (Zagzebski, 2012). Bartsch et al. (2025) define epistemic authority as having a dual

role: it must be subjectively recognized, perceived as possessing a knowledge advantage, and objectively justified – demonstrably holding an actual advantage in knowledge. In digital media environments, where the premises of knowledge production and distribution have become increasingly fragmented, new, and unconventional actors have emerged to fulfil this dual function (Bartsch et al., 2025; Carlson, 2020).

JOURNALISTS AS EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES

Throughout the modern era, journalism has held an authoritative role among the most influential knowledge-producing institutions, being acknowledged about its distinct epistemology: how journalists know what they know, and why that matters for the knowledge practices and products in which they are engaged (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). Journalists have actively constructed, claimed, and defended their epistemic authority in public discourse by drawing on specific sources, such as official authorities and expert professionals (Bartsch et al., 2025). These actors have held the power to define social reality through journalism’s evidentiary practices (Carlson, 2020).

What distinguishes journalists from experts is that they do not generate knowledge through scientific methods. Instead, they evaluate, synthesize, and compare information from experts across various fields. Reich (2012) defines journalists’ expertise as “interactional”, highlighting their ability to collaborate with specialists and translate complex knowledge into accessible information for the public. Croce and Baghrmian (2024) argue that being an epistemic authority often requires less direct evidence, knowledge, or understanding than expertise in a specific domain, and instead involves a different set of intellectual virtues (see also Croce, 2018; Jäger & Malfatti, 2020).

Journalists consistently emphasize that one of the core values of their profession is verifying information and getting the facts right (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). As early as the 1920s, Walter Lippmann argued that journalism should reflect a scientific spirit – consulting multiple sources, carefully gathering and evaluating evidence, posing equally rigorous questions regardless of personal bias, remaining open to unfamiliar or opposing perspectives, and maintaining transparency throughout the process in service of the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). To uphold this commitment, journalists have developed a range of strategies for validating and verifying knowledge claims. These include methods for identifying

reliable sources and applying rigorous assessment practices (Steensen et al., 2022). The digitalization of news media and the advancement of digital technologies have created a need for new practices to scrutinize the credibility of sources and the content they produce (Steensen et al., 2022). In response to this challenge, Steensen et al. (2022) introduce a contemporary approach to source criticism – one that functions as a practical framework for navigating the complexities of knowledge production in an era marked by information disorder.

ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES

The long-held assumption that journalism holds epistemic authority and legitimacy has been broadly challenged by a growing body of evidence (Kreiss, 2019). At its core, what is at stake is the erosion of knowledge institutions that have long served as “authorized knowers” through the news (Fishman, 1980, p. 145). Research indicates that cultural and social identity, along with partisan affiliation, significantly shape what people perceive as factual (Kreiss, 2019; also, Flynn et al., 2017; Hersh & Goldenberg, 2016). This transformation, often described as an *epistemic crisis*, can be seen as a disruption of the shared perception of reality (e.g., Dahlgren, 2018; Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022; van Dalen, 2020). Such breakdown stems not only from the digitalization of societies but also from the erosion of trust in mainstream media and the proliferation of alternative information sources (Dahlgren, 2018). Indeed, the shift unfolds in how knowledge is understood within society – particularly in relation to epistemic institutions such as journalism, academia, and politics (Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022, p. 153).

In epistemic crisis, there is no longer a common and shared understanding of what constitutes reliable information or how it should be produced, consumed, and corrected (van Dalen, 2020). It means that people not only disagree on how to address core political issues, but they also have differing opinions on the factual foundations of these disagreements (Hameleers, 2024). To a certain extent, this may reflect the plurality and diversity of opinions within liberal democratic contexts. However, when such issues involve fatal and calamitous matters, such as climate change or the resolution of armed conflicts, the divergence in factual understanding and interpretation can become detrimental. Hameleers (2024, p. 36, referring to Arendt, 1967) emphasizes that the core principles of truth, which underpin a deliberative democracy, are at stake. When people

fundamentally disagree on what is true or false, it becomes exceedingly difficult to resolve more complex societal issues. This crisis represents a breakdown in collective trust, which is inherently imperfect, biased, conditional, and requires constant re-evaluation (Haider & Sundin, 2022).

As the media landscape has shifted from a low-choice to a high-choice environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017), new and competing producers of knowledge have proliferated (Chadwick, 2017). Bartsch et al. (2025) identify emerging epistemic actors as including social media influencers, alternative media outlets, NGOs, peer production collectives, mobile apps, and AI-driven platforms – entities that both claim epistemic authority and are recognized as such by their audiences. Accordingly, alternative epistemic authorities derive their influence from their role as powerful content curators, particularly on social media (see Mayerhöffer et al., 2024). Recent research shows that independent right-wing podcasts have actively contested the epistemic authority of mainstream journalism, primarily in the U.S. context (Dowling et al., 2022), and more recently in Finland as well (Vaarala, 2025).

In these epistemic contests, actors outside traditional media challenge the authority of established journalistic institutions while simultaneously working to construct and legitimize their own forms of epistemic authority (Dowling et al., 2022; Vaarala, 2025). U.S. podcast producers, for instance, have described themselves as “trusted arbiters of truth,” positioning themselves in opposition to traditional media (Dowling et al., 2022, p. 5). Given their influential status, it is crucial to examine how alternative epistemic frameworks are constructed and legitimized. In examining these non-traditional authorities and their roles as trusted producers and disseminators of knowledge, a central question remains: through what social processes do these forms of authority acquire legitimacy?

HOW DO ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES EVALUATE THE RELIABILITY OF KNOWLEDGE?

In this section, I explore the foundations of epistemic understanding based on interviews with content curators who serve their audiences as alternative epistemic authorities. This empirical analysis is guided by their responses to the question: “How do you define reliable knowledge?” This question assumes that conceptions of reliability shape both the methods

and sources used to seek and deliver knowledge, as well as the criteria for its evaluation. The analysis reveals that the standards for assessing source credibility can vary, sometimes slightly and sometimes significantly, depending on the perspective and position of alternative epistemic authority.

This analysis draws loosely on Ekström's (2002) theoretical framework on the epistemologies of journalism. While Ekström primarily focuses on television journalism, his framework can, to some extent, be applied to journalism as a whole and other forms of authorities – like the ones I am researching. According to Ekström (2002, p. 259), the premises of journalistic epistemology are constructed from three components: the form of knowledge, the production of knowledge, and the public acceptance of knowledge claims. Ekström (2002) introduces these premises by posing key questions for research on the epistemologies of journalism. The form of knowledge pertains to the characteristics of the knowledge produced and disseminated by television journalism to its audiences. The production of knowledge examines the rules, routines, institutionalized procedures, and systems of classification that guide the production of knowledge, as well as the criteria journalists use to determine what is sufficiently true and authoritative. The public acceptance of knowledge claims investigates the conditions that influence the public's acceptance or rejection of the knowledge claims made by television journalism.

While journalistic epistemology is intrinsically linked to journalism as an institution, encompassing specific communicative strategies, production processes, and audience roles (Ekström, 2002), alternative epistemic authorities can independently navigate within the hybrid media environment. Ekström (2002, p. 275) anticipated, already in the early 2000s, the significant challenges that digital communication technologies could pose to the structure of journalism. He argued that the internet was creating a new news market – one in which actors outside traditional journalistic institutions could produce and distribute news independently of established journalistic norms and conventions. Following Ekström (2002), I aim to identify the practices and methods that shape how alternative epistemic authorities acquire, distribute, and evaluate knowledge – rather than assessing the truthfulness of their accounts. I have organized the foundations into three sections: where to find knowledge, how to present knowledge, and how to evaluate knowledge.

The empirical examples presented in this chapter are derived from interview data collected from Finnish citizens who gather and disseminate

information from the standpoint of an alternative epistemic authority (Bartsch et al., 2025). This role is constructed based on the significance attributed to them by their online followers. The informants actively share alternative information that critically engages with mainstream media content through various platforms, including social media channels, blogs, and websites. The data comprises 25 semi-structured thematic interviews conducted between October 2023 and May 2024. 15 informants had several thousands of followers on various social media platforms, who reshared content provided by these alternative epistemic authorities, thereby enhancing their visibility. A few interviewees also managed their own channels, which further expanded their reach. Eight informants had fewer than 2000 followers on social media, yet they reported active involvement in various NGOs or offline communities. Two interviewees did not meet the criteria of alternative epistemic authority due to their lack of significant presence on social media or offline. Their participation in the research interviews was justified by their active engagement in writing news articles and other publications. The interviews were conducted in Finnish language and has been translated for this book chapter by the author.

Where to Find Knowledge

When evaluating the reliability of knowledge, alternative epistemic authorities primarily focus on the question of where knowledge originates. The source plays a crucial role, as a common argument among informants was that knowledge should be derived from the most original source possible. In line with this, alternative epistemic authorities widely value *scientific knowledge* for its perceived trustworthiness – largely because they believe it stems directly from its source. This trust is grounded in the scientific method, which begins with observation and proceeds through evaluation and critique. Several qualities reinforce the perceived reliability of scientific knowledge: its self-correcting nature, temporal relevance, independence, and its ability to offer the best available understanding at a given time. Informants also assessed the accuracy of information based on source visibility, noting that scientific research builds upon an established body of prior work.

[...] and then the fact that it is in a scientific journal, where it has been peer-reviewed and checked. Everything I have read from there has been reliable. And of course, there are perspectives there too, but when they are presented

reliably, showing what is based on what and so on. When you follow the source chain of scientific research, you are in touch with accurate information (Interviewee E).

However, the value that alternative epistemic authorities place on scientific knowledge does not equate to absolute or unquestioning trust in it. Informants identified several risks that could undermine credibility by distorting knowledge, such as potential ideological or political affiliations of research institutions, structural corruption in funding processes, the agency commissioning the research, and the selective dissemination of findings. These kinds of content curators often express strong confidence in their ability to consume and evaluate knowledge claims more effectively than journalists. This is particularly evident in their concerns about journalism and journalistic claims, as they frequently criticize journalists for misrepresenting or mishandling scientific knowledge – whether due to insufficient critical scrutiny, coverage of allegedly flawed studies, or overly narrow interpretations in reporting. In contrast, they claim to keep up with the latest scientific publications to ensure that no important information goes unnoticed. Some even read, for example, the entire IPCC report to better understand which perspectives might be missing from mainstream news coverage.

This is where the distinction between alternative news media and alternative epistemic authorities becomes evident. The latter are driven by a deep passion for information – an “eagerness to consume knowledge” (Interviewee W). Their sources span scientific publications and reports, national and international mainstream news outlets, various podcasts, social media accounts of researchers and other experts, as well as alternative media platforms. As Interviewee G explains, “We [the informants’ channel] look at alternative media to some extent because they provide a good grasp of the missing perspective.” Within this epistemic framework, both mainstream and alternative media are viewed as participants in a discursive struggle – informational ‘extremes’ that frame societal issues through their own biased lenses. Consequently, these individuals approach media both with a critical and cautious mindset.

In addition to scientific knowledge, alternative epistemic authorities place significant emphasis on *knowledge derived from lived experience*, which they regard as meaningful. The key question becomes how well shared information aligns with verifiable experiences. Put simply, if laypeople report experiencing something, that experience can be assessed as

true and potentially generalized as knowledge. One respondent (Interviewee L), who interacts with numerous people daily through their work, described how the most valuable knowledge for them emerged from these personal encounters. This illustrates how alternative epistemic authorities place considerable value on expertise gained through personal experience, often viewing such accounts as more reliable than information delivered by news media.

Similarly, they regard knowledge rooted in lived experience as comparable in reliability to that shared within trusted social networks – such as family, friends, and acquaintances – which likewise emphasize interpersonal relationships in acquiring knowledge. This perspective highlights the significance of community and like-minded individuals in the production and circulation of knowledge. Within this framework, the responsibility for evaluating the credibility of information ultimately falls on the recipient, as knowledge based on lived experience is often presented as equally valid as scientifically produced knowledge. This evaluation process differs notably from that of journalism, where experiential knowledge is typically interpreted and validated by domain-specific experts. Alternative epistemic authorities acquire knowledge through social interactions, networks, and forms of citizen activism, assessing its trustworthiness by consulting others and observing who else endorses or shares the same knowledge claims.

How to Present Knowledge

Another foundation of reliable knowledge emphasized by alternative epistemic authorities is the way *how knowledge is constructed and communicated*. The key criterion here is that knowledge should be explicitly grounded in unbiased – often scientific – argumentation, even though all knowledge inherently involves interpretation. On one hand, interpretation can complicate the assessment of reliability; on the other, it can foster discussion, critique, and diverse viewpoints. Informants therefore view the deliberative nature of knowledge as essential to its trustworthiness. They value open dialogue as a safeguard of knowledge's independence, whereas the suppression of discussion is perceived as a form of censorship. Within this framework, the responsibility to examine information from multiple perspectives lies with the knowledge provider, who is expected to acknowledge that no single account represents the absolute truth. This is also where alternative epistemic authorities see journalists as failing in their reporting, perceiving them as one-sided and overly interpretive – sharing

opinions rather than conveying information. While this is a common criticism that alternative news actors direct at mainstream media, informants noted that it applies to alternative media as well.

Alternative epistemic authorities claim to validate knowledge based on at least two independent sources. Without such corroboration, reliability cannot be ensured. This process can be seen as a form of self-reflection – an acknowledgment of the complexities involved in evaluating knowledge. As a result, a central question emerges: who is cited as an authority or expert? One informant (Interviewee D), for example, highlighted the importance of critically assessing who is granted the authority to speak as an expert in the public sphere, and noted that a plurality of expert voices is consistently missing from mainstream news – something that undermines its perceived impartiality.

[...] even with experts, that word has, at least in Finland, completely lost its value. Now we come again to the question of what makes an expert, as it's always the same faces there. And as I just said, in the case of the Ukraine war, well, I don't want to diss people, that's not the point, but because I speak things by their real names, if you haven't gotten a single expert assessment right, it really should be challenged (Interviewee: D).

In the digital media landscape, the boundaries between knowledge producers and information sources are becoming increasingly blurred. In such a space, audiences can directly engage with a range of experts, scientists, and professionals from various fields via social media platforms. Since communication no longer necessarily requires journalists as intermediaries, knowledge becomes more autonomous and accessible, and the role of traditional information sources – such as mainstream media – becomes less central when audiences have direct access to experts' and professionals' social media accounts.

How to Evaluate Knowledge

The final criterion focuses on the practices alternative epistemic authorities use to evaluate the trustworthiness of knowledge and justify its validity. Within this framework, the burden of proof lies with content curators – those who distribute information and reflect on their own standards of acceptance. These actors draw on a wide range of methods – from scientific reasoning to emotional and even spiritual forms of

justification – highlighting a clear departure from the practices typically employed by journalists. This confirmation can occur through multiple routes, including personal validation, such as intuition or a sense of which information might be true and which not, as Interviewee S explains:

[...] everything is information to me. And then you just have to try to think about what really seems true and what also seems true in my environment, so you can say that the news is true when you see it yourself, and you can be sure. (Interviewee: S)

In this framework, knowledge becomes free-floating information whose relevance is shaped primarily through social interaction. Its perceived objectivity diminishes as it is continuously evaluated through social, cultural, historical, and individual lenses. Cognitive bias may influence information-seeking behaviour, especially when individuals gravitate toward sources that reinforce their existing beliefs. Affective dimensions of epistemic understanding thus play a role in how alternative epistemic authorities assess knowledge. At times, a mere gut feeling of something being true is considered sufficient for validation.

“I believe that I – and all people, ultimately – have within ourselves, in our hearts, a sense of whether something is true. It’s a deep feeling that one learns to recognize. I don’t mean that you have to listen to it in every nuanced detail, but when it comes to the bigger picture, I’ve become sensitive to that inner voice or heart’s guidance. It makes it hard for me to speak nonsense. (Interviewee: V)

Alternative epistemic authorities regard self-reflection as a vital element of knowledge production. This process involves critically examining one’s life, everyday environment, and perceived anomalies to understand how these factors shape the ability to seek, evaluate, and share information. A common trait among informants was their strong sense of self-resilience and confidence, which they viewed as essential tools in this process. Persistently challenging oneself as a knowledge seeker – someone ‘doing their own research’ (e.g., Interviewee F) – emerged as a recurring theme.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the epistemic foundations that guide alternative epistemic authorities in their processes of seeking, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge across digital spheres, spanning both alternative and traditional sources. These actors increasingly derive their influence and authority from their ability to reach broad audiences with the content they choose to share. In doing so, they not only shape agendas and discourses within the alternative media landscape but also challenge traditional epistemic frameworks that have historically relied on institutional actors such as journalism. These challenges are particularly consequential for journalists, who now operate in a shifting media environment where their role in shaping public reality can no longer be assumed.

It is clear that the current epistemic shift may foster the emergence of diverse epistemic communities, potentially leading to an epistemic crisis in which there is no longer a shared understanding of what constitutes truthful and reliable information – or of how such information should be produced and consumed (see, e.g., Dahlgren, 2018; van Dalen, 2020). It is also evident that these new content curators challenge the established knowledge order rooted in the liberal-democratic tradition, which privileges rationality as the primary basis of epistemic authority. While the informants emphasized source criticism and the pursuit of knowledge from the most original sources available, they simultaneously valued expertise grounded in personal experience and knowledge shared within their social networks.

As a result, the monopoly of traditional knowledge institutions is increasingly fragmented, prompting both (alternative) media scholars and practitioners to acknowledge these emerging modes of knowledge assessment and acquisition – modes that appear to strongly resonate with contemporary audiences. The informants in this study identified as active citizens who assume responsibilities for information sharing traditionally associated with journalism. They described themselves as intensive consumers of information – a practice enabled by today's saturated media environment. While they acknowledged the importance of journalism, particularly in times of crisis, they also emphasized that it must be practiced responsibly – which, in their view, is often missing.

Even though the knowledge acquisition practices of alternative epistemic authorities may unfold in erratic and varying ways, I argue that they should not be unequivocally dismissed as sources of disinformation or

causes of information disorder. Rather, they offer an opportunity to reflect on the traditional knowledge order, which leans heavily on rationality while often neglecting the affective and social dynamics involved in knowledge consumption. It is worth considering why these alternative epistemic authorities attract such wide audiences – and why many individuals experience a sense of safety and trust in their care.

Acknowledgments This chapter was written as part of the ALTEA project, supported by a grant from the Säätiöiden post doc -pooli/The Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation. The data were collected within the DECA project, funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC), established within the Research Council of Finland, under grant number 372276.

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Alternative Media Use

From a Recognition-Theoretical Perspective

Leif Hemming Pedersen

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990's, Hegelian-inspired recognition theory, and especially the framework of philosopher Axel Honneth, has been influential in analysing social dynamics, conflicts and struggles around identity, justice, and freedom. However, while Honneth has addressed the role of traditional mass media as well as the internet in his historical account of the political public sphere as part of his book *Freedom's Right* (2014), recognition theorists have not substantially considered the role of media in relation to processes of and struggles for recognition. This situation has been somewhat remedied by an increasing attention towards recognition theory from media and communication research over especially the last couple of years (for overviews, see Campanella, 2022, pp. 518–522; Driessens & Nærland, 2022; Pedersen, 2023, pp. 23–40), but alternative media (use) remain unexamined from a recognition-theoretical perspective.

Thus, this chapter pursues such a perspective and unfolds the main argument that the *raison d'être* of alternative media to challenge or

L. H. Pedersen (✉)

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark

e-mail: hemming@ruc.dk

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_7

counter established news media and a perceived societal mainstream (see introduction to this anthology), can be (re)formulated as recognition demands or contestations of societies established recognition orders. In this way, alternative media function as arenas for – and expressions of – the social recognition struggles of their users. Importantly, the role of alternative media users in this regard cannot be neatly separated from that of producers. Many users actively shape discourse through commenting, sharing, and content creation, making them co-constructors of recognition claims, and contributors to both left- and right-wing alternative media often frame their work as giving voice to the voiceless (e.g., Cushion, 2024, pp. 99–101). This emphasis on voice underscores the importance of examining how users engage with and mobilize alternative media as platforms for recognition. Thus, this chapter focuses on users – not to exclude producers, but because users are the (perceived) seedbed of how recognition claims are enacted, negotiated, and circulated in and via alternative media.

I will unfold the main argument in three steps. First, I will give a brief introduction to the concept of recognition. Secondly, as the main part of the chapter, I will present three overall theoretical-empirical questions that arise when the study of alternative media use is approached from a recognition-theoretical perspective. In the discussion of these questions, I will include existing conceptualizations and empirical descriptions of users of alternative media from the research literature. Thirdly, in conclusion, I will build on the discussion of the three overall questions to outline an analytical model that can guide further studies of alternative media use.

THE CONCEPT OF RECOGNITION

To discuss the extent to which alternative media use can be understood as recognition processes and struggles, it is important to first understand what the concept of recognition entails. Simply put, the concept has its roots in Hegelian philosophy, where it plays a central role in Hegel's attempt to establish a "vision of human beings as essentially social creatures, whose capacity for freedom is inextricably linked to the norms and institutions of their particular communities" (McBride, 2013, p. 3). The overall premise is that individuals can only develop and maintain a practical relation to self and personal autonomy if their existence is reflected in and from other people, that is, through mutual recognition. Recognition is therefore considered a "vital human need" (Taylor, 1994, p. 26) in

terms of the establishment of individual identity as well as both small and large communities.

While these basic Hegelian ideas have influenced political and social philosophy in numerous ways, the establishment of specific recognition-theoretical frameworks first occurred through the 1990s under the common denominator of ‘recognition theory’. Recognition theory is mostly associated with the writings of philosophers Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, who are all regarded as recognition theorists despite their theoretical differences and disagreements. Fraser’s and especially Honneth’s relation to Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School tradition has also led to arguments for a “recognition turn” (e.g., Held, 2008) of this tradition – especially with the publication of Honneth’s main work *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1995).

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth conceptualizes three forms of recognition: love (or care), respect (or rights), and solidarity (or esteem). In Honneth’s framework, each of the three forms of recognition – love, respect, and solidarity – can help individuals build corresponding forms of relations-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Conversely, the absence of recognition (non-recognition) or experiences of disrespect can undermine these relations-to-self. Honneth identifies three parallel forms of disrespect: bodily violations, denial of rights (exclusion), and denigration (insults), each of which threatens the corresponding components of personal integrity and well-being. Ultimately, experiences of disrespect can lead to struggles for recognition, which Honneth in turn considers as the “engine of social change” (Honneth, 2003b, p. 243), especially when these struggles take the organized form of social movements in various ways, such as the historical examples of the workers movement, the suffragette movement and the civil rights movement.

Honneth’s framework and recognition theory more broadly have inspired a wide-ranging and eclectic body of literature across many fields, which include several critiques, revisions, and reinterpretations, also by Honneth himself. In this chapter, I draw on selected contributions from this evolving literature to explore how recognition theory can inform our understanding of alternative media use. I argue that approaching alternative media from a recognition-theoretical perspective raises at least three fundamental theoretical-empirical questions, which I will outline and discuss in the next sections of the chapter.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USE AS A ‘STRUGGLE’

First and foremost, it is a fundamental question how we can consider the use of alternative media as (a part of) a ‘struggle’ for recognition. To address this question, I will draw on Douglas Giles’ (2020), distinction between two forms of recognition struggles: affirmational and transformational. Affirmational struggles refer to “the ongoing efforts of individuals to seek recognition that constructs and affirms their personal identities and their place in society” (p. 210), while transformational struggles capture “responses to circumstances or instances of misrecognition that seek to rectify perceived injustices and restore healthy recognition relations” (p. 211). In this way, Giles seeks to explain how the everyday struggles and attempts to “fit in, belong, and to be accepted” (p. 212) are different from, for example, political struggles for rights, which result from experiences of nonrecognition or disrespect.

In relation to (alternative) media use, a key element here is that transformational struggles require some form of *publicness*, that is, a certain visibility beyond ‘private’ spaces or spheres. In some sense, all engagement with media (content) can help individuals construct and affirm their personal identity and create a sense of belonging to small groups or broader (imagined) communities (e.g., Anderson, 2006; see also Chap. 8). This power of media to structure and shape identity and social formations is also why mainstream media, have been described as central instruments in hegemonic efforts to (re)produce dominating norms, values and hierarchies in a given society (Gramsci, 2012). In contrast, alternative media may offer different identity positions and value frameworks, by offering users to be part of alternative interpretative communities of resistance (Rauch, 2021) as well as mutual recognition and approval (Schwarzenegger, 2023, p. 862).

However, for media use to have a transformational impact on the norms, values, and hierarchies that shape recognition relations in society, the associated practices must be publicly visible and acknowledged. The concept of the public sphere – originally formulated by Habermas (1989) – has evolved to encompass a range of perspectives, including critiques of its limitations in accounting for marginalized voices and fragmented media environments. In the context of recognition theory, public visibility becomes a crucial condition for transformational struggles, as it enables recognition demands to be articulated, contested, and potentially legitimized beyond private communicative spaces.

For the present purpose, I will draw on a recent article by Donges et al. (2024), who use a concept of recognition (albeit in a different sense than established recognition theory) to describe how the digital public sphere is characterized by so-called centre-periphery constellations. In these constellations, some actors seek widespread attention and prominence in public discourse, while others seek “relative obscurity” (p. 4579) or even to avoid observation from a larger audience, including certain types of alternative media that actively choose and prefer peripheral positions within the public sphere (p. 4580). These findings challenge a widespread assumption within established public sphere theories that actors are uniformly oriented and attracted towards a unified ‘centre’ of the public sphere (pp. 4580–4581).

In relation to recognition theory, the ambition of relative obscurity might point in the direction of establishing a largely affirmational context of a subculture or counterpublic that does not seek recognition from a wider culture or the larger society (Giles, 2020, pp. 240–241). This demonstrates that while affirmational struggles are part of “the constant general condition of being a social individual” (Giles, 2020, p. 16), for some people mutual affirmation is mostly attainable within subcultures or counterpublics. These contexts might then evolve into transformational struggles for rights, inclusion, or esteem by society at large, or to more agonistic, anti-systemic efforts to dismantle existing recognition orders (as I will elaborate below).

The media-related aspects of this dynamic can be explained via Donges et al.’s (2024) framework. They propose that the digital public sphere should be understood as a networked or interconnected multitude of sub-spheres, which they term *arenas*. Such arenas are central or peripheral within the overall public sphere but are also structured by their own centre-periphery constellations. These arenas are composed of specific issues as well as the actors – both speakers and audiences – who engage with them and with one another. They often overlap with other arenas, creating fluid and interconnected spaces of discourse. Some arenas are institutionalized and stable, while others are more transient and loosely organized. Importantly, these arenas can exist across one or multiple media platforms, reflecting the diverse and decentralized nature of contemporary public communication.

Most importantly, Donges et al. conceptualize these arenas and their centre-periphery constellations as structured and animated by four modes of recognition: attention, resonance, allegiance, and engagement. In this

framework, which is different from Hegelian approaches, recognition is closer to notions such as ‘feedback’ or ‘responsiveness’, rather than the affirmation of individuals’ or groups’ positive qualities, respect, or esteem, as emphasized by Honneth (2002, p. 505). Instead, these four modes of recognition – attention, resonance, allegiance, and engagement – can carry both positive and negative valence (Donges et al., 2024, p. 4582). This means that some actors may deliberately avoid recognition, while others might actively seek negative recognition within one arena, knowing that it could translate into positive recognition in another, overlapping arena. Attention is considered the “*sine qua none* of any arena” (p. 4582, highlight in original), while the three other modes of recognition involve increasing degrees of activity (such as following, liking, commenting, moderating, etc.), and more intensive recognition will move actors toward the centre of an arena (Donges et al., 2024).

Returning to Giles’ distinction between affirmational and transformational recognition struggles, two overall points can be stressed. Firstly, the first mode of recognition – attention – can contribute to affirmational recognition in the sense that spectators who pay attention to a certain arena might feel recognized and represented in others’ communicative acts (Hall et al., 2013). Nonetheless, paying attention does not constitute the visibility or the mutuality needed for spectators to indicate their own recognition demands or the act of joining others’ recognition struggles (Giles, 2020, pp. 255–262). In other words, a media user must do ‘more’ than pay attention in order to be engaged in a *transformational* struggle, although “small acts of engagement” (Kleut et al., 2017), such as clicking or liking, might be considered transformational recognition demands. Secondly, actors within public arenas – whether speakers or audiences – who engage through resonance, allegiance, or engagement may be participating in transformational recognition struggles. Indeed, Donges et al. (2024, p. 4582) understand arenas as open and accessible discursive spaces where definitions of social problems evolve. This openness is conceptually significant because it enables recognition demands to be publicly articulated, observed, and responded to. In other words, the permeability of these arenas allows recognition claims to enter public discourse, where they can challenge dominant norms and potentially reshape recognition relations.

RECOGNITION STRUGGLES AND THE NORMATIVITY OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

With the distinction between affirmational and transformational recognition struggles in place in relation to media use, we arrive at another central question: How can a recognition-theoretical perspective help conceptualize alternative media and their users regarding their political or normative positioning? Alternative media actors have been categorized by their affiliations with political parties (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2023; Brems, 2023) or described using labels such as “politically radical” (Downing, 2001), “hyperpartisan” (Larsson, 2019; Rae, 2021), or “populist” (Noppari et al., 2019). Over time, research and definitions of alternative media have been characterized by “compartmentalization” (Brems, 2024, 25; see also Chap. 1). Early studies emphasized their democratic potential in challenging mainstream media hegemony, often focusing on progressive or left-leaning outlets (e.g., Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). More recent work has highlighted the risks posed by hyperpartisanship, misinformation, and media criticism, particularly among right-wing actors (e.g., Heft et al., 2020; Klawier et al., 2022; Nygaard, 2020; Schulze, 2020). A newer strand of research seeks to move beyond this binary by adopting a “non-normative” approach (Holt et al., 2019), aiming to assess both left- and right-wing alternative media using the same criteria.

This discussion in the literature on alternative media (re)actualizes a fundamental issue within recognition theory: how to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate struggles for recognition (Iser, 2019, Sect. 4). Recognition theory, particularly in Honneth’s framework, is inherently normative – it is concerned with justice, autonomy, and the moral conditions of social inclusion (e.g., Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 2014; McBride, 2013, Chap. 4). This poses a challenge when analyzing alternative media that promote discriminatory or hostile content (for a related discussion, see Chap. 4). Can such expressions be considered recognition struggles? Here it is again relevant to apply Giles’ distinction between affirmational and transformational recognition struggles. From this perspective, the (technologically mediated) communities or subcultures that might form around discriminatory discourses, do indubitably involve processes and dynamics of affirmational recognition among actors, reflecting a basic human need for recognition and belonging (Giles, 2020, p. 16).

However, for a struggle to be considered transformational in the Honnethian sense, it must involve demands for social inclusion, legal

rights, or esteem within broader society (Honneth, 2003a). Such struggles must therefore be distinguished from what Giles terms *normative discrimination*: the use of recognition-like norms to label certain social groups as inferior or deficient (Giles, 2020, p. 90). Such practices deny individuality and moral worth of others and therefore fall outside the scope of legitimate recognition struggles (p. 97). While both recognition struggles and normative discrimination may stem from experiences of disrespect (Honneth, 2007, p. 77), the key distinction lies in whether the resulting articulation of the struggles uphold the principle of equal respect between individuals (see McBride, 2013, for elaboration). Importantly, while we know that normative discrimination characterize some far-right alternative media (Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2021; Tuomola, 2020), that users of right-wing alternative media in many contexts are immigration-critical (Newman et al., 2018, pp. 44–47; Schulze, 2020; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022) and hostile towards the mainstream media and established politicians (Ihlebak & Holter, 2021), not all right-wing alternative media or their users can be reduced to a matter of normative discrimination. These media can be diverse in content and context, and users may express a range of motivations and attitudes and engage with these platforms to observe and articulate broader social concerns. Moreover, contributors to both left- and right-wing alternative media often frame their work as giving voice to the voiceless (e.g., Cushion, 2024, pp. 99–101). Yet, research on how alternative media represent their users' social attitudes and recognition demands remains limited. This is where recognition theory can offer valuable insights. By adopting an audience-centred approach, scholars can explore whether – and how – users perceive alternative media as articulating their social criticisms and recognition claims. Such an approach can help disentangle the complex dynamics between media content, user engagement, and the legitimacy of recognition struggles.

ANTI-SYSTEMIC STRUGGLES

Closely related to the above discussion arises the question of how recognition theory should engage with the 'anti-systemic' character of many alternative media? These media actors and arenas – whether right-wing, left-wing, or ideologically ambiguous – are often defined by their opposition to dominant socio-political structures. Scholars have described this orientation as “anti-systemness” (Henriksen, 2024b; Holt, 2018;

Schwarzenegger, 2021), broadly understood as “a communicative repertoire for contesting the dominant socio-political order” (Henriksen, 2024a, p. 48). It is important to emphasize that while anti-systemness can entail normative discrimination, the distinction outlined in this section concerns two forms of *transformational recognition struggles*. Anti-systemness as normative discrimination aligns conceptually with Chantal Mouffe’s notion of antagonism, whereas anti-systemness as a transformational recognition struggle corresponds to her idea of agonism (see Wenman, 2013, for elaboration) – it is the latter that I am concerned with here. Drawing on Owen (2021), I conceptualize agonistic struggles as one form of transformational struggles – struggles *over* recognition – which I distinguish from the more familiar form in traditional recognition theory: struggles *for* recognition.

To begin with, anti-systemness in relation to alternative media use poses a challenge for a recognition-theoretical approach. Anti-systemic media and their users do not necessarily seek inclusion within existing institutions or recognition from dominant norms. Instead, they may aim to radically transform – or even dismantle – the recognition orders that structure mainstream society (see also Chap. 9 for the specific example of activist journalism). In this context, recognition is not pursued as a form of integration but as the target of resistance. This tension reflects a deeper debate within recognition theory. McBride (2013, p. 35) critiques what he calls the “recognition deficit model” which simplistically assumes that individuals who lack recognition will seek it from those with the authority to grant it. This model largely downplays that recognition can also reproduce domination and unequal power relations. This critique has been echoed by a range of scholars (e.g., Allen, 2010; Balaton-Chrimes & Stead, 2017; Ikäheimo et al., 2021; Markell, 2003; McNay, 2008), who emphasize the entanglement between recognition and power. Thus, McBride (2013) emphasizes that struggles for recognition are also struggles over authority or, simply put, power struggles over who gets to decide whom and what is “recognizable” (Butler, 2016). Consequently, recognition is understood as a site of contestation.

To understand this tension and the implications for studying the struggles of alternative media users, I rely on Owen’s (2021) helpful conceptual distinction between two orientations in recognition theory: the teleological and the agonistic. The teleological strand seeks to diagnose social pathologies that arise from nonrecognition and disrespect, distinguish genuine recognition claims from false or ideological claims, and articulate

recognition norms that promote justice and social freedom (p.293). In this view, recognition struggles aim to reform institutions and expand inclusion. Owen describes these as struggles *for* recognition, where the form and content is spelled out in terms of a theory of justice or a theory of ethical life (p. 305). In contrast, the agonistic strand focuses on struggles *over* recognition. These are not about securing inclusion within existing social structures and institutions but about challenging the recognition norms themselves. Participants seek to critically reappraise and contest the recognition structures that govern them (p. 293). Hence, while struggles *for* recognition seeks to reform a society's political and social institutions to be more just (e.g., expand rights to misrecognized or nonrecognized groups), struggles *over* recognition represent agonistic views towards existing norms and institutions and can thus be characterized as anti-systemness and the strive to replace the dominating socio-cultural order. This orientation aligns closely with the anti-systemic tendencies observed in many alternative media environments (although, as indicated above, such environments might also be built primarily around practices of normative discrimination).

Anti-systemic tendencies have increasingly manifested in an emergent “networked public sphere” (Benkler et al., 2015). As traditional actors like mainstream news outlets have lost their position as the only gatekeepers to the public sphere, the capacity to shape the public agenda has become more decentralized (p.612). As described above, this possibility for a wider range of actors to shape public discourse is also central to Donges et al.'s (2024) model of the digital public sphere. For instance, they highlight research into actors and environments that are characterized by “antagonistic and irreverent expression online” (p. 4580) and argue that such expressions challenge key assumptions in traditional public sphere theory. Specifically, they reformulate the idea – common in the work of Habermas (e.g., 1989, 1996, 2006) – that public discourse is always oriented toward a unified centre, typically defined by political power, and that actors are necessarily motivated to move toward this centre through communicative engagement. Importantly, Donges et al. (2024) further stress that these assumptions are largely shared by Habermas' critics, even those leaving theoretical space for marginalized groups and alternative counter-publics (e.g., Fraser, 1991). Thus, the counterpublics described by the critiques or revisions of Habermas' work can generally also be understood as referring to struggles *for* recognition, where non-recognized or misrecognized groups are assumed to move toward the centre via public communication

(in for instance alternative media). In contrast, the recent developments, to which the scholarly interest of alternative media researchers has also turned, include an attention toward what has been termed “anti-systemic counterpublics” (Henriksen, 2024a). Donges et al.’s (2024) emphasis on peripheral arenas of expression, often marked by irreverence and opposition, aligns closely with the idea that some actors do not seek recognition within dominant institutions but instead challenge the legitimacy of those institutions altogether. This can happen via attacking the centre and/or by seeking peripheries. This resonates with the notion of struggles *over* recognition, where the goal is not inclusion or reform but contestation of the very norms that define what counts as socially valid or politically visible. In this sense, Donges et al.’s (2024) model of a multi-arena public sphere describes the communicative infrastructure through which anti-systemic actors can articulate recognition claims that defy conventional pathways to legitimacy, by operating from the margins and reshaping the terrain of recognition itself.

These peripheral arenas allow actors not only to seek inclusion and reform but also to challenge the legitimacy of dominant recognition norms. As pointed out above, the role of alternative media users in these dynamics cannot be neatly separated from that of producers. This fluidity complicates the analysis but also underscores the relevance of recognition theory in capturing the diverse ways individuals and groups engage with alternative media. Whether aimed at reforming existing institutions or contesting them from the margins, alternative media use becomes a key site for negotiating recognition in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

In this concluding section, I build on the outline of the three overall questions discussed in the chapter to present a basic analytical model that can guide further studies of alternative media use. This model provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of recognition within the context of alternative media use, focusing on the three distinctions between (i) affirmational and transformational recognition struggles; (ii) between recognition struggles and normative discrimination; and (iii) between struggles for and struggles over recognition.

The first, and foundational, distinction between affirmational and transformational struggles helps to understand where and when alternative media users find a sense of belonging that affirms their personal

identities and social positions, and when their engagement in and with alternative media more actively and publicly engages in social conflicts and struggles. The latter transformational recognition struggles are responses to experiences of nonrecognition or disrespect, aiming to rectify perceived injustices and restore healthy recognition relations. Transformational struggles necessitate public visibility and engagement, positioning alternative media as a potential platform for challenging existing norms and advocating for social change. This theoretical distinction between affirmational and transformational struggles is crucial for understanding the different motivations behind alternative media use and its varying impacts on individuals and society. The distinction supports and can help conceptualize existing observations of alternative media use and has an immediate explanatory power that cuts across media systems, social and political contexts (for a discussion of media systems in relation to alternative media, see Chaps. 15 and 16).

However, the interrelations between affirmational and transformational practices are significant (Giles, 2020), and empirical analyses of alternative media use should pay close attention to these relations and the role of affirmational contexts for the development of different kinds of transformational struggles. Since alternative media is an obvious place to look for the articulation of recognition critique and demands, the insights from studies of alternative media use also have a broader relevance for explaining how people move from experiences of nonrecognition and disrespect to social struggles, which has been a continuous theoretical issue in recognition theory (Giles, 2020, Sect. 2.2).

This question also points to the next distinction in a basic analytical model: as outlined above it is important to be able to distinguish between recognition struggles and normative discrimination. While both of these can have vertical and horizontal dimensions (Ikäheimo, 2017), that is, take place between both individuals/groups as well as between individuals/groups *and* social institutions, normative discrimination involves the use of recognition-like norms to designate certain social groups as inferior or even inhumane, and therefore does not respect their moral autonomy in discussions of recognition. While such practices may arise from experiences of disrespect, they do not constitute legitimate recognition struggles in the Honnethian sense. This distinction helps to clarify the ethical implications of alternative media use and the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Again, there certainly might exist potential intertwinements between recognition struggles and normative discrimination, and

empirical studies of alternative media users can thus help understand when and why perceived experiences of nonrecognition and disrespect lead to (support for) different discursive articulations.

Although recognition struggles might or might not turn into normative discrimination that disregards the moral autonomy of others, recognition struggles *can* involve the rejection of the moral legitimacy of existing socio-cultural orders. This is encapsulated by the third distinction outlined in this chapter between struggles *for* recognition and struggles *over* recognition. Struggles *for* recognition seek to reform a society's political and social institutions to be live up to the ideals of justice that such institutions are otherwise thought to embody, while struggles *over* recognition represent agonistic views towards existing norms and institutions and can thus be characterized as anti-systemness and the strive to overturn the dominating socio-cultural order (although anti-systemness can also take up antagonistic forms, which I align conceptually with the notion of normative discrimination). Such struggles over recognition have increasingly manifested with the weakening of the gatekeeper function by traditional actors such as the established news media in networked public spheres. This distinction between struggles *for* and struggles *over* recognition is thus essential for understanding the broader socio-political implications of alternative media use.

In conclusion, the analytical model presented here provides a robust framework for studying alternative media use from a recognition-theoretical perspective. It offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the complex dynamics of alternative media use, by emphasizing the importance of public visibility and engagement for transformational recognition struggles, addressing the ethical implications of different articulations of social struggles, and considering the broader socio-political implications of anti-systemic tendencies. Hence, the model can guide future research in exploring how alternative media contribute to social recognition processes and struggles, ultimately advancing our understanding of media's role in shaping con-temporary social dynamics. Empirical analyses through various methods such as surveys, interviews, content analysis, and ethnographic studies, can thus be guided by the three outlined distinctions to explore (1) how individuals use alternative media to affirm their identities and how they engage in transformational struggles to address nonrecognition and disrespect; (2) to identify instances where media use seeks social inclusion versus those that promote normative

discrimination; and (3) to examine how media use either aims to reform existing institutions or contest the existing socio-cultural order.

Acknowledgements This research has been funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark [grant number 2097-00026A]. I want to thank the anonymous reviewer and the editors for very engaging and detailed suggestions for improvement of the chapter.

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CHAPTER 8

Examining the Expressive and Social Facets of Alternative Media Use: A Conceptual Framework Informed by Social Identity Theory and Fan Studies

Clara Juarez Miro

INTRODUCTION

The rise of radical right politics and affective polarization have disrupted democracies worldwide (Gidron et al., 2023; Mudde, 2019), alongside declining trust in news and digital transformations in journalism (Newman et al., 2024). Alternative media increasingly shape information flows across political contexts (e.g., Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2024). A key challenge within the scholarly field is a longstanding definitional fragmentation (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al., 2007), although a growing strand of work proposes a relational perspective that situates alternative media in relation to dominant media, either countering or complementing them by adding diverse voices, interpretations, or practices, as perceived by the producers, audiences, or other observers (Holt et al., 2019). The field also reflects

C. Juarez Miro (✉)

Department of Political Science, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

e-mail: c.juarezmiro@ub.edu

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European*

Contexts, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_8

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analytical biases (Rauch, 2019) and limited attention to audiences. Scholars have thus called for audience-centred approaches that move beyond normative assumptions (Frischlich et al., 2023) and acknowledge the porous boundaries of alternative media audiences (Brems, 2025). These challenges and emerging directions, I argue in this chapter, call for adaptable analytical frameworks.

Against this backdrop, this chapter proposes that combining social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and fan studies can advance research on alternative media audiences. By focusing on how group memberships influence alternative media use and how such practices publicly signal and reinforce these memberships, this approach provides a deep understanding of the social dynamics at play. Examining alternative media through the lens of social identity theory and fan studies allows for an audience-centric approach, emphasizing audience needs and valued media attributes (Costera Meijer, 2013; Swart et al., 2022). This perspective has the potential to further advance theory-driven understandings of alternative media audiences, moving beyond outlets' ideological leanings and topic-based distinctions. It also sheds light on how audiences engage with alternative media content and interact within surrounding communities. Highlighting the social aspects of alternative media use, including collective interpretations and shared emotions, can reveal how these practices strengthen social bonds and group identities.

To illustrate these arguments, the chapter draws from a broader study examining how populist supporters understand populism and navigate their media environments. The evidence provided is based on 33 in-depth interviews (between April and October 2021) and 6000 online community interactions (between September 2019 and January 2021) with populist citizens in the United States and Spain, including supporters of right-wing leaders Donald Trump and Santiago Abascal, as well as left-wing counterparts Bernie Sanders and Pablo Iglesias. Populist supporters offer a particularly compelling case given their critique of mainstream media, active engagement with alternative platforms, identification with the community of 'the people,' and experiences (or fears) of losing that community through de-platforming at the time of data collection. The comparative research design further illustrates how the framework can inform analyses beyond national contexts and ideological leanings. These examples are not meant to provide exhaustive answers to specific research questions but to illustrate and support the theoretical concepts developed below.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USE

Alternative media research has underscored their capacity to strengthen emotional ties and reinforce collective belonging among oppositional groups. This body of work is shaped by three main theoretical traditions, drawing on the concepts of (online) counterpublics, interpretive communities of resistance, and emotional regimes.

Counterpublics are discursive spaces that emerge when groups excluded from dominant public spheres use alternative platforms to express their identities, perspectives, and needs (Fraser, 1990). Online, they engage with yet remain outside the mainstream, cultivating shared critique, emotional solidarity, and alliances with other oppositional actors (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Venema et al., 2025; Schwarzenegger, 2021). Interpretive communities form around shared understandings of events, reinforcing collective narratives and belonging (Berkowitz, 2019). While some complement the broader public sphere, others become communities of resistance that challenge dominant media and political narratives (Rauch, 2021) and thus resemble counterpublics, where belonging is rooted in shared dissent and opposition to hegemonic discourse (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2025). Emotional regimes describe how news media define legitimate emotions and provide emotional orientation in uncertain times (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). When audiences see mainstream media as dismissive of their emotions, they may turn to alternative outlets that validate their feelings, as seen among far-right online commenters (Ihlebak & Holter, 2021).

While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the social and emotional drivers of alternative media use, combining social identity theory and fan studies introduces a more performative perspective on how individuals engage with news. This framework helps uncover less visible but meaningful motivations behind identity expression, as well as the endorsement and circulation of narratives within alternative media. Social identity theory explains how users express group membership, for example by endorsing certain ideas or sharing content to demonstrate belonging. Fan studies complement this by exploring how such expressive acts contribute to community building, reinforce group identity, and foster a sense of connection among members.

A FRAMEWORK INFORMED BY SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND FAN STUDIES

Developed in the field of social psychology, social identity theory explains how individuals understand and navigate the social world by categorizing society into groups, a process known as social categorisation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This process helps people define themselves by identifying as members of certain groups (in-groups) while distinguishing themselves from others (out-groups). According to Tajfel (1972, p. 292), social identity is “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership.” To maintain a positive self-concept, individuals seek to elevate the status of the groups they belong to through favourable comparisons with other groups, a process called social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Fan studies emerged from cultural and audience studies as a means of examining the unique dynamics of fandom communities. Defining fandom, however, is not straightforward for several reasons. First, the term is widely used in non-academic contexts, which can lead to ambiguity and varying interpretations (Hills, 2002). Additionally, fandom spans a broad spectrum of topics, including popular culture, sports, politics, and current affairs, among others (Barnes, 2022; Driessen et al., 2024; Juarez Miro, 2021). Despite these complexities, fandom is often defined as a community rooted in its members’ committed, intense, and affective engagement with a particular cultural object (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005). These communities are characterized by fan practices such as collective meaning-making, production and sharing of media texts, advocacy for shared expectations, and creation of alternative social communities that foster connection and belonging (Jenkins, 1992). The rise of digital technologies has further complicated the definition of fandom, as these tools have lowered barriers to participation in fan activities, turning it into a widespread mode of media engagement, although not everyone is a fan of everything (Gray et al., 2007).

Combining social identity theory with fan studies helps explain how alternative media foster belonging in specific communities. This is important in contexts where mainstream media—which traditionally serve to represent and sustain communities over time (Carey, 1992)—fall short, as in the case of populist supporters (Juarez Miro, 2025; Schulz et al., 2020). By focusing on audience interactions and interpretations, this combined

approach highlights four key dimensions (see Table 8.1) that emphasize the relational and communal functions of alternative media rooted in performative acts of identity expression. These dimensions are outlined below and explored further in the following sections.

First, the framework provides conceptual tools to examine how alternative media help audiences define and communicate group belonging through processes such as *social categorization and validation* from relevant others. Second, it sheds light on people's identification with

Table 8.1 Analytical dimensions for the study of alternative media audiences

	<i>Short description</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Social categorization and validation	How audiences classify outlets and related communities as in-groups or out-groups, then seek affirmation in spaces with like-minded others	Analyze the social categorization and comparison logics that steer people to alternative media spaces for identity confirmation and norm validation when mainstream outlets feel unsupportive
Shared values and interests	How audiences foreground shared, (perceived) normatively desirable values and publicly reference specific alternative outlets to signal actual or aspirational membership and find like-minded others	Examine the performance of value alignment and signalling, why people choose and publicly reference outlets that mirror their views to express and perform identity, reinforce norms, and build belonging
Collective practices and meaning-making	How communities engage in community-insider rituals and collectively interpret events in alternative spaces to build solidarity and pursue common (political) goals	Show how collective rituals and shared interpretations turn media use into identity work performance, reinforce group narratives (including perceived mainstream media hostility), and shift analysis beyond content toward the meanings audiences co-produce
Affect and emotions	How public displays of emotions and relationships, and the fulfilment of emotional/social needs can shape media engagement, offering validation, belonging, and spaces to process conflict, enthusiasm, or opposition	Explain how emotions drive outlet choice and switching, how loss of access disrupts belonging, and how affective expression and anti-fandom/out-group hostility can shape media engagement

communities that express and embody *shared values and interests*. This is significant for groups who feel these values are stigmatised or socially undesirable, as is often the case for populist supporters (Juarez Miro, 2025). For such audiences, alternative media can help maintain a positive self-concept in the face of perceived marginalization. Third, this combined perspective deepens our understanding of how audiences engage with content and signal belonging through *collective practices and meaning-making*, including the reinterpretation and circulation of texts in alternative digital spaces, and collaborative strategies for advocacy and resistance, especially against mainstream media. Fourth, as these practices foster tight-knit communities, the framework helps explain how alternative media contribute to the formation of communities where *affect and emotion*, both felt and publicly expressed, play a central role in strengthening social bonds and collective identity.

Building on these dimensions, the framework can help explain how and why alternative media use becomes central to users' social identity and community belonging. As illustrated by the dimensions, as well as the examples included in the remainder of the chapter, this is often driven by a combination of external and internal factors. External drivers may include perceived threats such as social exclusion within the in-groups or delegitimization by mainstream institutions, which can negatively affect one's self-concept. Internal drivers may include a need for affirmation, emotional resonance, and a desire for connection with like-minded others. These forces collectively influence the discursive practices that establish community boundaries and foster sustained engagement with alternative media.

Social Categorization and Validation

Group membership holds significant meaning for individuals, even when group differences are externally assigned and artificial. In a series of experiments, Tajfel (1970) demonstrated that even when participants were randomly assigned to groups based on arbitrary distinctions, they exhibited intergroup bias, favouring their own group and discriminating against others during tasks such as assigning or subtracting points. Outside controlled environments, where group memberships often carry profound personal and social significance, these dynamics have important political implications (Huddy, 2001). When group members perceive a conflict between their in-group and one or more out-groups, they often

experience strong collective emotions and display behaviours aligned with their group identities (Mason, 2018; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This is evident in the case of political identities, such as national, racial, gender, or ideological affiliations (e.g., feminist, environmentalist). Partisanship is another powerful example of a (political) social identity that has a strong influence on behaviour and decision-making, even more than policy considerations themselves (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). While partisanship most directly affects electoral behaviour, research suggests it also shapes broader social and cultural attitudes and practices. For example, the alignment of partisanship with other meaningful identities like race or gender in the U.S. has become so pronounced that it can now predict consumer behaviours such as where people shop, what restaurants they frequent, or which cars they drive (Geburu et al., 2017; Mason, 2018; Wilson et al., 2014). It is therefore not surprising that local, national, or party identities can also influence which media individuals use and trust (e.g., Edgerly, 2015; Gottfried & Liedke, 2021; Swart et al., 2017).

While mainstream media can help clarify social identities through framing (Price, 1989) and by stimulating political discussion (Cramer, 2004), they can undermine a positive social identity when perceived as hostile, as seen among populist supporters (Juarez Miro, 2025; Schulz et al., 2020). Combined with social identity theory, fan studies offer additional insight into both general and alternative media use. Together, they provide a framework for understanding how audiences express the unique value alternative outlets offer their in-group, a value mainstream outlets lack because they are perceived as serving out-groups (see Bailey et al., 2007). Perceived exclusion from the mainstream and the search for connection similarly drive the formation of fan communities (e.g., Radway, 1984). Consequently, many individuals turn to like-minded, alternative communities, often on digital media platforms, to express their identities and seek validation and reinforcement. For example, Elena, a supporter of Santiago Abascal whom I interviewed, described sharing content that endorsed Abascal and criticized his opponents, thus showcasing intergroup conflict and signalling her allegiance. She explained that she often enjoyed sharing

news that tend to come up, but, above all, critical ones, when they are critical of the opponent. [...] Or praising maybe a speech in Congress by someone from Vox putting everyone else in their place, for example. That kind of news.

Shared Values and Interests

An integrated social identity and fan studies framework can show how practices that foreground shared, normatively desirable values and interests signal group membership, helping audiences find and recognize one another in digital spaces. Social identity theory explains how social norms guide these expressive uses of alternative media by shaping what members believe others expect of them and how they should act (Tajfel, 1970). For example, the Trump supporters I interviewed were intentional about joining like-minded online communities, actively seeking groups that supported Donald Trump to connect with others who shared their values and strengthen their sense of belonging. This dynamic, also seen in fan communities (Jenkins, 1992), was reinforced through social interaction and shared viewpoints. As Ray, one such Trump supporter, explained:

[Reading posts on r/The_Donald subreddit I felt] that some of the beliefs I had were not crazy, or isolated? [...] Plus, occasionally, you just want to hear something that's what you think. You want to hear something that's consistent with what you believe, and it's nice to go to a place that you don't have to look that hard for that, and that you're not going to get taken down by Facebook for looking at it.

Additionally, alternative media use, or the expression of such use at any given time, can respond to one's will to signal an actual or aspirational social identity to other members of that group or even to out-groups. Other groups of populist supporters I interviewed also described participating in ideologically aligned online communities. While these spaces were not always directly connected to their populist leaders or sought out deliberately, being part of them still fulfilled key needs, such as a sense of belonging, opportunities to express and receive messages that reflected shared values, and legitimation of those beliefs. For example, Sanders supporters were involved in progressive neighbourhood groups, unions, or activist organisations. Iglesias supporters frequently engaged with left-leaning alternative news outlets and activist groups, while Abascal supporters gravitated toward broadly patriotic communities and right-leaning news media. As Brandie, a Sanders supporter, explained:

I have commented on there [an activist Instagram page] before, especially when it came to stuff regarding George Floyd and Derek Chauvin and stuff, I did comment. [...] I think they were fairly positive because a lot of people on that page, they're like me.

As in fan communities (e.g., Baym, 2000), practices like sharing, commenting, and joining political discussions can function as expressions of group membership: they signal affiliation, reinforce group norms and values, and help others learn the behaviours and beliefs required for belonging. In another example illustrating how expressing alternative media use can signal common values, Andrea, an Iglesias supporter, explained that sharing articles from Spanish Revolution, a progressive alternative outlet born of Spain's *Indignados* movement, communicated her political stance and group identity more clearly than sharing content from *El País*, a prominent centre-left mainstream outlet: "Even though they publish journalistic information, they do it in a more personal way, bringing it to an ideological level that is consistent with me. I like being informed. I follow newspapers, but I do like seeing information and these people's viewpoints because it matches mine. Also, when sharing content, even if I can share a news story from *El País* and I can add a comment on it, whatever, if I share these people's news instead, it will reflect my position about an issue more accurately than *El País*, for example."

Collective Practices and Meaning-Making

An important aspect of fandom and fan activity is collective participation in niche practices that signal community norms, reinforce shared values, and strengthen emotional bonds among members (Baym, 2000). This dynamic can be seen in the QAnon conspiracy movement, which has been likened to a fan community for its ability to cultivate affective engagement and collective discourse within digital spaces and alternative community platforms, such as message boards, while also pursuing explicit political goals (Reinhard et al., 2022). A similar phenomenon was evident in the online communities of populist supporters I observed. For instance, a Facebook user encouraged public displays of support for Senator Bernie Sanders by urging others to change their profile pictures: "Show your support for Bernie by changing your profile to a green heart for BERNIE! (three green heart emojis)" (United for Bernie Sanders Ideas, Facebook Group). This collective and public action, easily recognized by community insiders but obscure to outsiders, exemplifies how such mediated practices, coordinated from alternative spaces, can foster solidarity and reinforce a shared identity.

Moreover, examining audiences' interpretations and experiences of alternative media and mediated communities offers a path forward for advancing research beyond content-based analysis of specific outlets, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of alternative media. Research suggests that critiques of mainstream media by both right- and left-wing alternative media are often similar: their audiences tend to share hostile perceptions of mainstream media, form collective identities shaped by these views, and believe that mainstream media oppose them due to political and commercial interests (Cushion et al., 2021; Rauch, 2019). Audiences of both types of alternative media also tend to express demands of objectivity and the promotion of civic participation in media (Rauch, 2019). Additionally, research suggests that while alternative media use is relatively widespread and associated with political interest, consuming ideologically extreme content does not necessarily lead to significantly more extreme ideological positions among audiences (Brems, 2024).

As studying social identities and the media that shape them is particularly complex outside experimental settings, given the influence of history, culture, and the subjective nature of identity (Huddy, 2001), it is essential to engage with alternative media users and explore the meanings they assign to both their identities and media use. For example, an Abascal supporter perceived the news as deliberately hiding facts to manipulate public opinion against Abascal while favouring immigrants and political opponents ahead of an upcoming election. By posting her reaction publicly on Facebook, she expressed outrage, signalled allegiance, and contributed to a shared interpretation of events. Her post shows how she identified in-group and out-group actors, viewed her group as unfairly treated, and rejected mainstream coverage as biased:

And on La Sexta [a prominent commercial TV station] they keep making Abascal look like he is a liar and a manipulator, about false data regarding the *menas* [unaccompanied immigrant minors], but nothing about this. They keep making it seem like Abascal is racist, xenophobic, supporting the violent extreme right, ever since last Monday's debate. They won't stop until after the election. You can tell they are scared. I wish Vox won and put them in their place! (Santiago Abascal, Official Facebook Page).

This act of public communication can be seen as part of the community's collective meaning-making practices, reinforcing shared narratives and strengthening group identity through the reinterpretation of media events.

Affect and Emotions

The focus on both social identity and fandom in understanding the role of social community is crucial. Social identity theory helps us understand how alternative media provide an outlet for those seeking to reject mainstream narratives that prevent them from maintaining a positive self-concept. Additionally, fan studies' emphasis on community offers a deep understanding of how these media can serve as spaces for social gratification. The importance of such mediated spaces for connection and solidarity is evident among Trump supporters who were de-platformed in 2020 for violating social media providers' terms of service (Copland & Davis, 2020; Wong, 2020). Many described feelings of sadness, frustration, and alienation after losing access to their mediated communities. For instance, Savannah admitted feeling "very lost," while Elizabeth expressed anger, stating, "It shouldn't be that only one side can get their news and their views." These findings illustrate that losing access to preferred media impacts more than just information consumption, it also disrupts shared spaces for collective meaning-making and undermines audiences' sense of belonging.

Beyond the interviews, this dynamic was also evident in the digital interactions observed. One example came from a Facebook post shared by an Iglesias supporter, which sparked responses publicly expressing solidarity. The post read:

They can say what they want, they can defame as much as they want, I support Podemos!!!! And if someone is bothered by it, they can go screw themselves!!! Smile because we can, yes, we can [Podemos]!!!

The responses further reinforced the collective identity: "And I am proud of it (three purple heart emojis, one arm flexed emoji)," "yes we can (Republican flag colour heart emojis)," and, "YES WE CAN BUT IT'S HARD TO LISTEN TO THOSE RATS AND JUST IGNORE IT" (Pablo por una Unidad, Facebook Group). These interactions show how alternative media platforms serve as spaces for emotional expression, community affirmation, and symbolic resistance. Examining them through social identity theory and fan studies reveals how these platforms both enable rejection of mainstream media and serve the social and emotional needs of alternative audience communities (see Bailey et al., 2007). They

do so by creating mediated spaces where individuals can collectively express and process emotions, share meaning, and belonging.

Additionally, just as social identity theory highlights the distinction between in-groups and out-groups, fan studies examine the dynamics of fandoms and anti-fandoms. While fandoms are united by a shared love for a cultural object, anti-fandoms emerge as affective communities bonded by their collective dislike or rejection of that object, with members finding connection and enjoyment through shared negative feelings (see Click, 2019). Through the lens of anti-fandom, therefore, scholarship can examine how alternative media audiences bond not only through shared values and worldviews but also through explicit rejection of mainstream discourse. It also can help explore how alternative media content may include antagonistic rhetoric that departs from journalistic norms but effectively engages audiences to advance social and political objectives (Sandvoss, 2019). This is particularly relevant considering that journalistic actors in alternative media can establish epistemic authority through deep, specialized knowledge of the communities they serve, even when they exhibit varying levels of journalistic professionalism (Juarez Miro et al., 2025).

Similarly, because communities are united not only by shared emotions toward the object of fandom but also by affective ties among members, fan studies provide a useful framework for exploring the role of emotions in alternative media use. This perspective sheds light on which emotions drive, and are elicited by, specific patterns of engagement with alternative media. When combined with social identity theory, it can help clarify how intergroup conflict—as framed by mainstream media (Mason, 2018; Price, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)—can shape alternative media use. For example, a Trump supporter voiced their dissatisfaction with Fox News and described how switching to Newsmax better validated their worldview. As this user explained, he

left Fox after years of watching ... Election night, Chris Wallace, and snarky Neil Cavuto and Sandra Smith tipped the scale for me ... I now watch and LOVE Newsmax!!!! Still watch Tucker, Hannity and Laura ... No daytime shows at all ... Never again! (Trump Daily Report, Facebook Group).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored key concepts from the literature on social identities and fandom to propose a theoretical framework for future research on alternative media. Social identity theory offers insight into how alternative media facilitate social categorisation and identification, fulfilling self-esteem and social needs through in-group bias and group validation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Meanwhile, fandom, understood as a highly mediated community centred around a cultural object and shaped by affect, shared interests, and collective practices, functions as an alternative social space where members forge affective ties and engage in collective meaning-making (Jenkins, 1992). As this chapter argues, both strands of research show how media enable the performative expression of identity in alternative media spaces, allowing users to signal belonging and reinforce social identity, especially within communities that see themselves as marginalized or excluded from the mainstream.

Integrating social identity theory and fan studies allows for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics from a social and cultural psychological perspective, emphasising the role of alternative media in shaping processes of belonging and identity. Furthermore, the proposed framework has the potential to inform future research on how alternative media enable audiences to define, affirm, and strengthen their social identities by fostering a sense of belonging within communities that fulfil affective, self-esteem, and social needs. By focusing on alternative media users and the meanings they derive from engagement, scholars can move beyond analyses confined to specific outlets or national and ideological contexts. This broader perspective enhances comparability and contributes to the development of an integrated terminology and theory applicable across the diverse field of alternative media.

To support these arguments, the chapter drew on an extensive data corpus to provide illustrative examples. These were not intended to offer an exhaustive or systematic account of the data collected but rather to demonstrate how the highlighted concepts can help interpret it. The data focused on populist supporters, a valuable case due to their negative attitudes toward mainstream journalistic media, active engagement with alternative media, strong identification with the community of “the people,” and experiences of deplatforming, which led them to seek alternative mediated communities during the data collection period. While this focus helped illustrate the framework’s applicability, the theoretical model,

rooted in social identity theory and fan studies, is relevant beyond the context of populism and alternative media. In fact, these dynamics of media consumption apply more broadly, as not only alternative media users engage with (digital) media to form, reinforce, and express social identity. The emotional turn in journalism studies suggests that these social and emotional dimensions are present across the public sphere more generally (Lecheler, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Ultimately, however, as alternative media are conceptualized as serving the needs of specific communities in opposition to mainstream media (Bailey et al., 2007), this framework is particularly well-suited to clarifying how such media cater to alternative audiences while positioning themselves against perceived out-groups. By examining these dynamics, the framework helps us understand how alternative media and platforms meet users' social and emotional needs by enabling public expressions of collective identity, fostering mutual recognition, and strengthening audience communities in opposition to the mainstream.

Acknowledgements The data for this chapter derive from my PhD research (IRB approval: STUDY00011155), supported by the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. I thank the Journalism Studies Center at the University of Vienna, especially Dr. Phoebe Maares, for introducing me to this book project, and the Department of Political Science, Constitutional Law, and Philosophy of Law at the University of Barcelona for its continued support. Finally, I thank the volume editors and contributors for their insightful feedback, which greatly strengthened this chapter. Any remaining errors are my own.

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CHAPTER 9

Activist Journalism: Alternative Media and Conditions for Social Change

Lina Moscoso Teixeira

INTRODUCTION

The increasing importance of the internet and digital technologies has facilitated the emergence and activity of digital activist alternative media, which was first accelerated by global protest movements such as the Arab Spring in 2010, *Occupy Wall Street* in the United States in 2011, *Los Indignados (15 M)* in Spain in 2011, *Jornadas de Junho* in Brazil in 2013, and *Geração à Rasca* in Portugal in 2011. Digital media arose to fill the informational vacuum left by established news media in contexts of censorship by authoritarian governments, such as China (Hong Kong), while also acting alongside and in support of social protest movements, with the objective of becoming an instrument of social transformation. Activist alternative media have established themselves as tools for contesting the political system as a whole, that is, they position against the business model adopted by mainstream journalism, but also against the actions of neoliberalist governments, parties and politicians. Engaging in leftist activism and aligning with social movements to advance social change, these media outlets use activist journalism to bring about changes in laws and

L. M. Teixeira (✉)

IADE, Universidade Europeia, Moscavide, Portugal

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_9

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government actions, challenge the status quo and promote social and economic justice.

In her book *Activist and alternative new media*, Lievrouw (2023) proposes the following definition of alternative activist media: “alternative/activist media projects deploy communication infrastructures [...], and reconfigure artifacts, remediate practices, and re-form social arrangements, to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture and politics” (p. 25). The term “alternative” refers to a broader universe of news production projects with different political positions and formats (e.g. Cushion, 2024; Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Atton, 2002; Holt et al., 2019). “Activist media” (Downing, 2001; Lievrouw, 2023), on the other hand, has been defined by some scholars through more specific conceptual frameworks, even though activism remains one of the central designators of alter-native media outlets. In the literature on alternative/activist media, scholars have primarily studied left-leaning or progressive media, with democratic and emancipatory aims (Lievrouw, 2023, p. 27). These media seek to counter the new wave of extremism emerging from the 2010 and onwards, including the resurgence of fascist ideals and radical right-wing governments, new protest movements and militant digital communication outlets. Activist alternative media are configured as instruments of struggle for the rights of socially vulnerable groups. These are projects adapted to contemporaneity, since they make use of new technologies to promote mobilization and “information for action” (Atton, 2002, p. 12). Activist alternative media possess a clear political-ideological stance and are, at times, explicitly partisan and even anti-systemic in their approach (Chan, 2017). Thus, to define these outlets, we can also use Gramsci’s (1991) concept of counter-hegemony, insofar as these media seek to (i) break with the hegemony of audience domination and the means of production and distribution of the mainstream media, and (ii) reverse the social, political and economic exclusion and mobilize for societal transformation.

There is an inbuilt contradiction in the term *alternative activist media*. Williams (1980) established an essential distinction between ‘alternative’ practices and ‘oppositional’ practices, namely: alternative culture seeks a space to coexist within the existing hegemony, whereas oppositional culture seeks to replace it. For instance, left-wing activist media are anti-capitalist, as they aim to change the system through activist practices and should be understood as oppositional in their intentions (Atton, 2002). In contrast to non-activist alternative media which largely follow traditional

journalism models and genres, activist alternative media create “information for action” (Atton, 2002, p. 12) in their methods of production and distribution. Some activist alternative media prefer to adopt the language of the internet: numerous abbreviations, profanity, and the use of originally virtual artifacts such as memes, hashtags, and emojis. Consequently, they often avoid delving deeply into issues, as they follow the fast and superficial rhythm of social networks (Lievrouw, 2023).

PRACTICES OF CONTEMPORARY ACTIVIST ALTERNATIVE MEDIA – THE CASE OF MIdIATIVISTAS

In Portuguese, activist media are often referred to as *midiativistas* [media activists] or “*midialivristas*”¹ [free media] (Bentes, 2018, p. 153). One example here is the Brazilian collective *Mídia NINJA*, which introduced a new type of discourse when information began to be disseminated through digital platforms and social networks. This *midiativist* discourse aimed at transforming political, economic, and communicative realities. The *midiativistas* not only covered demonstrations but simultaneously took part in protest activities themselves. Lorenzotti (2014) calls such media “crowd media,” since they also create political events, intervene in events, and become part of the news (p. 86). Political intervention and social participation create a form of media activism and the possibility of creating horizontal networks of like-minded media (Bentes, 2016).

The *midiativistas* are typically collectives that work in collaboration with social movements. In the digital age, the dissemination of protests through activist alternative media has in Brazil shifted from university-affiliated newspapers to social networks. Moreover, the connection has become closer, as the same activists engaged in communication are often also members of social movements. Thus, *midiativismo*, more than a social or political phenomenon, represents “a laboratory of experiments and innovations in media and social models that would develop in the future” (Pasquinelli, 2002, n.p.), similar to what Castells (2013) terms mass self-communication. Furthermore, the scale of dissemination and reach is far

¹ Midialivrisimo is the production and dissemination of informational content by citizens themselves, using digital technology to democratize access to information and avoid the distortion present in some established news media. This concept focuses on the actions of individuals and collectives in recording and sharing narratives from the perspective of the crowd, intervening socially by acting as an active body in communication and mobilisation.

greater due to the virality of activist media content, a phenomenon characteristic of social networks. The “new collectivism” movement coined by Lievrouw (2023, pp. 61–62) proposes that activist projects have been formally constituted as collectives, cooperatives, or associations, which means that new activist alternative media projects are based on an “assumption of community, interactivity and participation” (Lievrouw, 2023, pp. 62–63).

For activist alternative media such as *Midia NINJA*, it is key to respond to issues instantaneously, that is, information must be provided immediately in order to mobilize and provoke reactions in their users almost simultaneously with the occurrence of events (Teixeira, 2022). Therefore, activist alternative media are outlets that produce content on social networks and websites with the purpose of mobilizing people in defence of causes or of encouraging reflection on certain, often controversial, issues. In this sense, the objective of digital activist alternative media is to promote social transformation. Thus, the central point of connection between media and social protest movements lies in activism for change. It is inherent to such outlets to have emerging issues at their core, since it is inherent to activism to respond to social issues as they arise (Atton, 2002). Moreover, activist alternative media employ “reproductive innovations/adaptations”, making full use of the available technology (Atton, 2002). These activities have been facilitated by the internet and digital applications, as they face financial constraints in sustaining their operations. However, they create new dependencies on social platforms to produce and disseminate their content.

THE ROLE OF ACTIVIST ALTERNATIVE MEDIA FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Activist alternative media are often connected to protest movements, which employ them for processes of critical information, communication and coordination about protest activities, and cooperation (e.g. Atkinson & Dougherty, 2006; Atkinson, 2008). Studies have found a clear correspondence between alternative media use and political protest mobilisation (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009) and demonstrated that users of activist alternative media have stronger pro-protest attitudes (e.g. Chan, 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Leung & Lee, 2014). As activist communication outlets, these alternative media constitute counter-public spheres that are dialectical opponents of corporate media monopolies and political opinion

monopolies. Protest movements are phenomena that reverberate within the political contexts of different countries as a result of transformations in contemporary political, economic, and social landscapes.

The study of activist alternative media is largely grounded in social movement theories, which conceptualize such movements as diffuse power structures in which participants exchange information through multiple communication channels to co-ordinate temporary communities focused on achieving temporary objectives (Atkinson, 2008). The protest movements are generally small, decentralized, and democratic; cyclical and diffuse in time; and oriented towards the construction of identity action (Huesca, 2001). Regarding the connections between social movements and communication outlets, Lievrouw (2011) argues that activist media technologies are “well suited to the presentation of consistent messages” (p. 151) to heterogeneous audiences, “shaping broad-based popular opinion, fostering mass consumption, and mobilizing mass political campaigns” (p. 151). New media technologies assist individuals in searching for, locating, and evaluating information, as well as in mobilizing through skills such as cultivating relationships, seeking and offering advice, making recommendations, accumulating and exchanging ‘reputation capital’, and establishing online trust (Madden et al., 2007). They also play a role in “bringing people into the streets” (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p. 480).

Contemporary activist alternative media in Spain, Portugal and Brazil illustrate the close relations between movements and media (see Teixeira, 2022, for details). Brazil’s *Mídia NINJA* media project was for example founded in 2013 during the nationwide *Jornadas de Junho* demonstrations for the free public transport passes.² In terms of relationships with social movements, *Mídia NINJA* and *Jornalistas Livres* - another Brazilian *midiativist* collective - cooperate with the social movements *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST)* in São Paulo and the *Movimento Sem Terra (MST)*, among others. In Spain, left-wing alternative media collaborate with trade unions and movements in defence of the Palestinian cause. *El Salto*, for instance, covers the issue in partnership with organisations such as the *Comitè per Palestina UB*, *Acció per Palestina UAB*, and the *Coalició Prou Complicitat amb Israel (CPCI)*. In Portugal, alternative media outlets such as *Fumaça* and *Guilhotina.info* critique the anti-popular measures of

²The Free Pass Movement (MPL) is a Brazilian social movement that advocates for the adoption of zero fares for public transport.

right-wing parties, including the *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD) and far-right party *Chega*, and the consequences of their policies, such as the housing crisis, police violence, and attacks on immigrants. In this way, they collaborate with or amplify the agendas of social movements such as *Vida Justa*, *O Lado Negro da Força*, and *SOS Racismo*.

These protest movements not only used digital platforms but also received support from alternative media to amplify their ideals of struggle and incorporate broader participation. The close connection between protests and alternative media stems, broadly speaking, from activism on behalf of human rights. Thus, like activist alternative media, popular movements act as mechanisms for the defence of democracy and social justice, contesting modes of governance while demanding participation and popular representation. In the context of communication, these movements are fundamental to understanding media behaviours and their relationship with democratic spaces, particularly within digital spaces (Lievrouw, 2023).

INTERCONNECTED PROTEST MOVEMENTS

The digital presence of and engagement with social movements has expanded rapidly over the last twenty years (Lievrouw, 2023). This has altered the nature of contemporary movements and activism, which Langman (2005) refers to as “interconnected social movements”(ISMs) (pp. 44–45). These types of cyberactivist, internet-based movements fundamentally changed movement-media-relations from mid-2000 onwards, enabling new transnational activist movements in which “communication technologies are an integral feature [...], inseparable from the values, practices, lifestyles, identities, and interests of the movement” (Juris, 2005). Such global circulation of discourses, strategies and tactics signals the emergence of a global network of transnational alternatives (Juris, 2005, p. 196).

According to Juris (2008), activists are not merely users of media and information technologies but have in fact absorbed the “cultural logic of networking” (Juris, 2008, p. 11) into every aspect of the movement’s values and practices, both online and offline. In short, Lievrouw (2023) emphasizes that the internet has become an indispensable tool for the coordination and organisation of groups and protests: planning and debating future actions, recruiting participants and volunteers, sharing organisational advice, soliciting funds and other forms of support, and managing

the myriad logistical aspects of bringing together tens of thousands of people. In practice, social movements create actions, while media outlets disseminate information, mobilize support, coordinate actions, build networks, practice media activism, and manifest emerging political ideals in physical space (Juris, 2005; Lievrouw, 2023). This is done by leading and shaping public perceptions, opinions, and feelings (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 156). In this way activist alternative media express and circulate the interests, values, and symbolic representations of activists' problems, aiming to change popular discourse and the perception of movement issues and even "the stage of the movements themselves" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 156).

All forms of collective action, whether social movements, traditional forms of civic engagement, or those employing new information technologies, are fundamentally communicative (Flanagin et al., 2006). A classic example of collective action that is simultaneously a media collective and a social movement is Indymedia. For Pickard (2006a, 2006b), *Indymedia - the Independent Media Center*, created in the US in 1999 - represented a new network of social movements, insofar as it positioned itself as a network of activists sharing information structured into narratives with common themes through mailing lists and discussion forums. Furthermore, these activists formed temporary protest communities when issues important to the networks were threatened by dominant societal power structures (Best, 2005; Stengrim, 2005).

Overall, the actions of activist alternative digital media and social movements are deeply intertwined. The networked structure enables interactivity among activists and gives rise to protest communities, as shown in the works of Best (2005), Pickard (2006a, 2006b), and Stengrim (2005). Likewise, public interactivity in the production and use of alternative media employed by new social movements is fundamental to collective action (Atkinson & Dougherty, 2006; Atton, 2002). Atkinson (2008) argues that media coverage of protests can create an identification on the part of audiences with the causes defended by social movements and disseminated by activist media, so-called "collective consciousness" (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986). During *the Occupy Movement's* street mobilisation, for example, the slogan "We are the 99%" was adopted to boost a collective consciousness in the general public by contrasting the majority as exploited, and hence in opposition to, a wealthy minority. By propagating the slogan through the mainstream and activist media, the movement aimed to "encourage greater self-identification among citizens,

which could, in turn, lead to support and action” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 3). Related to this, journalistic coverage can also provide important “mobilizing information” about the practical and logistical aspects of how and where individuals can participate, should they wish to join a social movement or protest (Lemert, 1984). Thus, digital media play a fundamental role in the mobilisation of protests and in the creation of discursive spaces for deliberation and the organisation of collective action by social movements, as first exemplified by Occupy Wall Street (DeLuca et al., 2012).

COVERAGE OF PROTESTS: ESTABLISHED NEWS MEDIA VS. ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

On the one hand, protest movements are foregrounded and supported by alternative media; on the other, they receive systematically negative coverage from more established news media outlets (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). The established news media frequently frame protests as acts of vandalism or even disorder. This type of framing is referred to as *the protest paradigm* in the mainstream media, describing key characteristics of how established news media marginalize and delegitimize social movements (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Kilgo and Harlow (2019) argue that such patterns are created by the “symbiotic yet unbalanced relationship between activists and the press” (p. 2). The authors explain this halting relationship as follows:

(1) the press does not cover movements that do not engage in journalistic activities; (2) activists organize events to attract media attention, which they require in order to disseminate their messages to wider audiences and signal their strength; and (3) journalists then cover these staged events without providing substantive information about the context of the protest or the grievances and agendas underlying the movement (pp. 2–3).

The protest paradigm thus describes the paradoxical relation between protest movements and the established news media – the movements seek to adapt to and appeal to media logic in order to gain media coverage and visibility, but when they do, the media tend to demonize demonstrators by characterizing them as threats to society, marginalizing their voices, and downplaying the grievances, demands, and agendas of the movements (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019, pp. 2–3). Overall, the protest paradigm rests on the ideological positioning of protests and the degree to which such positions challenge the political or social status quo. Agendas that radically

contest the political and social status quo are usually excluded by the established news media. Other protest movements, on the other hand, could support the status quo and push agendas which uphold power relations sustained by white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and ableism” (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019, p. 16).

Activist alternative media have managed, in some cases, to push social protests into the media agenda. By covering them, they can in some cases effectively ‘force’ mainstream outlets to do the same (see Teixeira, 2022, for elaboration). For example, *Mídia NINJA* succeeded in putting demonstrations held during the *Jornadas de Junho* in São Paulo into the Brazilian established news media, making major media such as the Brazilian broadcaster *Rede Globo*, to cover the mobilizing. However, while *Rede Globo* broadcasted live through aerial images, *Mídia NINJA* producers were inside the protests, streaming live via Facebook. Moreover, the language choices, image editing, and photographic selection of *Rede Globo* largely disparaged the demonstrations (Teixeira, 2022). Overall, scholars identify various structural, organisational, and institutional characteristics of media production, as well as the disruptive nature of social protest, as factors influencing journalistic coverage of social movements (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). A long-standing research literature on media and protest stresses that the institutional logic of mainstream media does not favour social movements (Gans, 1979), due to the distance between the protest and the media source; the conflict orientation and newsworthiness of the protest, organisational ideologies and professional routines, and support for the protest all shape media production with respect to protest coverage (Amenta et al., 2012; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2008; Oliver & Myers, 1999).

THE EDITORIAL AGENDA OF ACTIVIST ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

As outlined above activist alternative media play a social role in transforming reality. For this reason, they operate in an activist manner, which is reflected in their editorial agendas and topical emphasis. The selection of topics is carried out in accordance with the political ideals of the outlets, especially in the case of activist media that openly disclose their positions in their discourse and descriptions. Transparency is one of the important features of these media. Particularly, left-wing activist alternative media stress the critique of the current state of affairs; in other words, they typically question the system and/or the political measures of right-wing and

far-right governments, laws, and parties. Regarding agendas, we can identify certain differences among activist alternative media: Whereas some prefer to address more progressive and global issues of social change, others focus on national and regional topics (Teixeira, 2022). So-called community media work on local agendas because of their need to defend the communities they represent. This is the case of smaller-scale activist media, such as those that emerge and operate in Brazilian *favelas*, like *Favela em Foco* and *Portal Rocinha*. Similar examples in Portugal include community media such as *Jornal Mapa* and the extinct *O Corvo*. The topical emphasis is also related to the differing political and economic contexts of the countries in which these media are located. Activist outlets tend to address national and local issues relevant to their own societies. For instance, the Brazilian alternative left-wing projects deal with indigenous issues because it is a pertinent political issue in the country, as the demarcation of indigenous lands is under discussion (Teixeira, 2022).

Nevertheless, some broader issues are addressed across most progressive activist alternative media, such as climate change, LGBTQIAPN+³ rights, racism, Palestinian rights and the housing crisis. Brazilian activist projects, for example, approach climate change from the perspective of the Global South, the hemisphere that has most strongly felt the effects of climate change. Issues concerning LGBTQIAPN+ populations, particularly violence against them, are emphasized because it is a subject that addresses the social vulnerability of groups that suffer the most violence both in America and in Europe. Racism is another recurrent theme in these outlets, due to police violence against immigrants and racialized communities in Brazil, Europe, and the United States. Further, the Palestinian issue is yet another example of a global core issue, as it is considered a highly relevant cause for the political left. In Europe, the housing crisis has further occupied the coverage spaces of activist media and beyond. The editorial distance between activists and the established news media is exemplified through their coverage of housing conflicts: Here activist alternatives defend the side of the populations, especially the less well-off, while the established media often advocates in favour of land-owners, tourism, and real estate speculation (Teixeira, 2022)

³ LGBTQIAPN+ is an expanding acronym that represents the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, including Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender (or Transsexuals), Queers, Intersexuals, Asexuals, Pansexuals, and Non-binary.

DRIVING POLITICAL-ADMINISTRATIVE AND AGENDA CHANGES

Activist alternative media can impact social change either indirectly, by changing the established news media agenda, or directly by driving the implementation of political and administrative changes. These interventions represent precisely the objectives that activist alternative media aim to achieve: Social transformation through the enforcement of basic human rights.

The performance of *Mídia NINJA* serves as an example of the interference of alternative media in the agenda of established news media (Teixeira, 2022). The producer Raíssa Galvão stated that the media outlet she works for introduces topics into the agendas of established news media outlets: “What we report influences what they [mainstream media] are trying to reply. So yes, it has an impact and relevance” (personal interview, September 3, 2018). Similarly, Portuguese activist alternative media *Guilhotina.info*, has been able to alter the narratives of established news media on several occasions, such as in the presentation of certain protests and events, as explained by producer Duarte Guerreiro: “Sometimes they changed because there was evidence collected by *Guilhotina* showing that things had not occurred exactly as reported by traditional outlets” (personal interview, January 30, 2020).

Regarding legislative changes, the Spanish activist magazine *El Salto* advocated for housing legislation that guarantees community rights, particularly in response to demands from platform users affected by mortgages (Teixeira, 2022). Likewise, Portuguese *Guilhotina.info* had an impact on certain court cases where evidence collected by the outlet was crucial in demonstrating incidents of police aggression. “For example, in 2019, during anti-racist demonstrations on *Avenida da Liberdade* in Lisbon, which faced police charges, *Guilhotina.info* collected videos⁴ that were later, at the request of one of the case witnesses, submitted to the defence to be used as counter-evidence”, explains Duarte Guerreiro, producer of the outlet (personal interview, January 30, 2020). The activist media *Mídia NINJA*, participated in the approval of the *Marco Civil da Internet* - which is the law that regulates Internet use in Brazil by establishing principles, guarantees, rights, and duties for those who use the network, as well as determining guidelines for the State’s actions (Law No.

⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc_xbehs8e8

12,965/2014). Other legislative achievements driven by the *Mídia NINJA*, are *Lei Cultura Viva* (community-based policy aimed at strengthening and expanding access to culture); *Lei de Participação Social* (policy enabling citizens to monitor and participate in the formulation and implementation of public policies); and the *Marco Regulatório das Organizações da Sociedade Civil* (set of laws establishing rules for partnerships between public authorities and civil society organisations in Brazil) (Teixeira, 2022).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that a certain type of alternative media practises activist journalism using new technologies in defence of human rights, with the aim of promoting social transformation. The communication strategies employed by alternative activist media are producing critical content, influencing the agendas of established news media and even promoting changes in laws and government actions that defend oppressed groups. This is because activist journalism aims to mobilize people, mainly through social media, to pressure legislative and judicial bodies to formulate and pass laws that benefit the less privileged populations, as well as to criminalise racial, class and gender discrimination. The strategies employed and the topics addressed by activist media can differ according to the socio-political contexts of their countries of origin (Teixeira, 2022). While activist alternative media typically focus on issues most relevant to their local or national context, they do not neglect international topics (which are also important to local populations).

It is crucial to reflect on the purpose and significance of activist alternative media's transformative role and social function as providers of democratic and pluralistic information, and what they contribute to communication studies. At the same time, we stress that these outlets operate under conditions of limited reach and staffing, as they depend on digital platforms, donations and crowdfunding campaigns, and volunteer work to sustain their activities. Thus, in the field of activism, activist alternative media not only produce information but also promote social transformations they deem necessary, thereby potentially contributing to the democratisation of information and combating disinformation.

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PART II

Methodological Challenges



Studying Alternative News in an Ethical Manner: Challenges and Best Practices

Lena Frischlich and Heidi Schulze

INTRODUCTION

Studying alternative news and its users is, first and foremost, research related to humans. Humans produce alternative news, feature in its coverage, and form its audiences; alternative news production and reception are embedded in social groups, institutions, and cultures. Best practices for studying alternative news must thus be rooted in the general principles guiding research with human subjects.

Ethical principles describe the field-specific values and norms guiding individual research behaviours and mechanisms for monitoring transgressions. For research with humans, these principles are rooted in medical and psychological ethics and reflect two central moral intuitions (Graham et al., 2013): caring for vulnerable others while avoiding harm and preserving fairness and avoiding injustice. The influential Belmont Report (Ryan et al., 1979) summarized these intuitions in three core principles:

L. Frischlich (✉)

Digital Democracy Centre, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark
e-mail: lefr@sam.sdu.dk

H. Schulze

Department of Media and Communication, Ludwig-Maximilians-University,
Munich, Germany

respect for persons' autonomy, beneficence, and justice. The American Psychological Association (2023) similarly highlights respect for participants' rights, beneficence respectively non-maleficence, and justice, while also adding fidelity, responsibility, and integrity as measures to build trustful professional relationships. Strategies to implement these principles were first formalized in the Nuremberg Code (1947) which emerged from the trials of Nazi medical practitioners in Nuremberg after WWII. The code outlines ten principles to prevent harm. Among others, it emphasized voluntary consent, the right to withdraw, protection from harm, and the requirement that research serve the good of society. Since then, these principles have been discussed, refined, and adapted for specific research contexts (e.g., Roth & Unger, 2018); however, the general principles of respecting self-determination and autonomy, caring and preventing harm, ensuring fairness and justice, and beneficial effects remain pivotal (i.e., autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence).

Studying alternative news presents unique ethical challenges in upholding these principles. In the following, we will discuss these challenges along the entire circle of social scientific research (Staines et al., 2023), from the phenomena and questions studied over data collection and data analysis to the publication of research findings. We will also discuss the need to care for researchers who study alternative news, as this can be associated with an increased risk of victimization (Blümel & Just, 2024; Obermaier et al., 2024; Seeger et al., 2024), and some content can impact researchers' well-being severely (Whittaker et al., 2025). We will end with recommendations for ethical alternative news research.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN ALTERNATIVE NEWS RESEARCH

Deciding What to Study

Social scientific research typically starts with the observation of a phenomenon and the formulation of a research question. However, the question of what to study contributes not only to the scientific understanding of a phenomenon but also to the general understanding of the (social) world around us. Labelling something as 'alternative news' and applying the concept to concrete articles, producers, posts, or media outlets studies should thus be carefully reflected.

In our own work, we have suggested a relational umbrella definition of alternative news. We understand alternative news first and foremost "in

light of a position as a self-perceived corrective of “traditional,” “legacy” or “mainstream” news media in a given sociocultural and historical context” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). Alternative and established news are thereby best understood as a continuum, and nuance is needed when using the broad umbrella term. For example, alternative news in authoritarian regimes might enact very different journalistic values than those in liberal democracies; hyper-partisan alternative news (Rae, 2021) differs in their content from alternative news by marginalized communities (Woo-Young, 2005).

A sloppy use of concepts and careless engagement with specific outlets or media practices risk harming research subjects and societies. For example, lumping alternative community news with propagandistic alternative counter-news without reflecting on the reasons for this choice creates risks that both types of outlets are perceived as equally ‘dangerous’, ‘alarming’ or ‘threatening’. This can contribute to the *securitization* of media practices by marginalized communities—that is, the portrayal of alternative media and their producers and users as a potential threat to safety, stability, or public order (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). Simultaneously, a sloppy use of concepts can ease the mainstreaming of extremist ideations (Rothut et al., 2024) by positioning, for example, explicitly anti-democratic alternative news within the realm of legitimate democratic debates.

It is also critical to question, for instance, right-wing alternative counter-news self-positioning as ‘alternative’, given that outlets often copy content from other sources (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022) and provide little actual space for alternative voices (Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). Scholars might thus find it helpful to distinguish between what Eldridge II (2025) terms agonistic (enacting productive differences) versus antagonistic alternative news (enacting a destructive animosity that seeks to destroy the other side).

At the same time, predetermining what is perceived as ‘alternative’ by producers and their audiences and ignoring the similarities between alternative news from the left and the right, such as their catering to distrustful audiences (Rauch, 2019) risks violating principles of fairness. The same holds for equating alternative news uniformly with ‘fake news’, given that studies have shown that not all content in alternative news is misleading (Boberg et al., 2020), and truth and half-truths are often interwoven (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). In sum, different types of alternative news are distinguishable (Frischlich et al., 2020), and researchers should be transparent about which of them their respective study refers to and why.

Data Collection

Data collection is often considered one of the central, ethically challenging aspects of research. Of course, general best practices for research apply to research on alternative news, too. However, there are also specific ethical challenges in alternative news research. As discussed above, the conceptual ambiguities of the term transfer directly to case selection, which is not only a methodological task but also an ethical one: careless selection risks unfairly stigmatizing some media, legitimizing others, misrepresenting the field, or ascribing identities that conflict with producers' and audiences' self-understandings. These risks are amplified by the dynamic and relational nature of alternative news, which means that its boundaries shift across contexts and in relation to mainstream media. To address this, several scholars (including ourselves) rely on triangulation, for example, by drawing on prior scholarship, examining which other sources the audiences of alternative news use (so-called overlap networks), and taking into account how producers and outlets present themselves (Frischlich et al., 2020; Kristensen et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). Such triangulations can help mitigate perceptual disagreements between scholars, producers, and audiences (which can lead to perceptions of unfairness) and increases transparency of the research.

Another risk to fairness and justice arises from the selection of which aspects and types of alternative news are studied. For example, most recent studies on alternative news emerged from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic contexts (Waisboard, 2022). Only a tiny proportion of humanity lives under such WEIRD conditions (Henrich et al., 2010) and focusing on the surge of far-right and conspiracy theoretical alternative news in these contexts risks overlooking the potentially viable function alternative news can have for informed public spheres in the Global South and East as shown by studies on Turkey, Greece, Hong-Kong, or Chile (Ozgul & Veneti, 2022; Leung & Lee, 2014; Luna et al., 2022). But even in WEIRD countries, the focus on far-right and conspiracy-oriented alternative news, aimed at studying potentially democracy-damaging dynamics, risks overlooking the positive functions of, for example, agonistic alternative news. Such outlets may contribute to democratic deliberation and include marginalized groups in public discourse. From an ethical perspective, this imbalance risks distorting the field and undermining principles of fairness and beneficence by neglecting the diversity of alternative media.

Besides these more general considerations, two main strands of research can be distinguished, including in alternative news research: reactive or interactive research versus non-reactive or non-interactive research (see also Markham et al., (2012) for a related distinction). In interactive research, the researcher directly interacts with the data subject (e.g., through surveys, experiments, interviews, and participatory observations) and analyzes data resulting from this interaction. In non-interactive research, the researcher and the research subject do not interact directly. Examples of such non-interactive approaches include content analyses, studying digital traces, statistical modelling, and secondary data analysis. Both types of research can employ qualitative, quantitative, and computational methods. While all of these methods have their own ethical challenges (see, for example, Panter, 2011; Roth & Unger, 2018; Waldherr et al., 2025), we will focus in the following on those emerging for alternative news researchers across interactive and non-interactive research respectively.

Interactive Research

The gold standard of interactive research is informed consent, regardless of whether quantitative (experiments, surveys) or qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, participatory observations) are used (see Chaps. 11 and 12 for more detailed discussions of specific methods). Data subjects should be fully aware of the risks associated with participation and should be able to withdraw their consent at any time (American Psychological Association, 2023). This is particularly the case if the data processing entails “potential risks to the data subjects’ rights and freedoms” (European Commission, 2018), which includes freedom of speech and information rights.

In interactive alternative news research, a central risk arises from exposing participants to alternative news brands or content, for example, in surveys on media use or experiments. For example, presenting alternative news in the same list as established news, participants might encode and store them in memory as ‘news’ all together (Young & Wassermann, 2005). This could increase familiarity with alternative news among new audiences and risks contributing to the normalization of anti-democratic sources. At the same time, asking for alternative news practices separately can violate principles of fairness, wherefore an individual reflection during survey or stimulus design is recommended. Further, experimentally

exposing participants to alternative news can lead to biased attitudes or foster distrust (Andersen et al., 2023; Frischlich et al., 2021). Researchers should carefully adhere to good practices of debriefing in such cases. For example, they could explicitly inform about alternative news or rely on “cognitive inoculation” techniques (van der Linden, 2023) to call out manipulative coverage (irrespective of the source) more generally. Such generalized approaches are more likely to adhere to fairness principles than calling out specific outlets.

Fairness can also be threatened through a lack of representation of alternative news users or producers in research samples. Alternative news users often hold more populist attitudes (Müller & Schulz, 2021), which are associated with science-related populism and distrust (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Such distrust may lead sceptical users to decline participation, leaving their views absent from research. This not only limits representation but may also skew findings by portraying alternative news users as less extreme than they actually are (as those with more extreme views do not participate at all). At the same time, some people holding populist attitudes actively seek to influence scientific work (Mede, 2023), which could lead to strategic participation, for example, from alternative news users or producers that seek to advance their own agendas rather than provide valid reflections of their views (see also Chap. 11 in this volume).

Both risks of misrepresentation are statistically more likely to affect small samples (such as is typical for interviews). It would thus be desirable to learn about participants’ prior research participation activities and their motivations for participation. Yet, interviewees’ identities typically cannot be shared, especially not in areas such as alternative news research, where this could lead to stigma for research subjects. Research data infrastructures (e.g., data trustee models, such as those in the German GESIS institutes’ AVERA project, which will enable digital account sharing for social scientists studying the radical right) that allow access to relevant information about prior interview participation without disclosing sensitive data (European Commission, 2018) would be urgently needed for alternative news research. For now, we encourage researchers to reflect on sampling bias risks and aim to maximize the participation of diverse users or producers of alternative news to increase the fairness of the conclusions drawn (see also Chap. 11).

One measure to increase participation is fair incentivization (e.g., through payment or increased self-knowledge). However, even small financial incentives can pose ethical challenges, e.g., when reaching

producers of anti-democratic alternative counter-news. Allowing participants to donate their compensation to prosocial causes may be a more ethical alternative in such cases (Eppert et al., 2020). Several organisations nowadays offer vouchers to donate to registered organizations (e.g., <https://charityvouchers.org>), covering a wide array of topics, from animal welfare to arts, sports, caring for children or the elderly, aligning with very different worldviews.

Including producers of alternative media as research subjects raises additional ethical concerns. Interviews can provide valuable insights into organizational routines, self-understandings, and accountability that are not accessible through documents alone. At the same time, such interactions risk legitimizing antagonistic positions, exposing vulnerable groups to harm, and increasing risks to researchers. Excluding producers altogether—especially if progressive actors are interviewed but far-right ones are not—also requires ethical justification on grounds of fairness. Researchers should weigh the public value of direct interaction against the risks of normalization or agenda laundering, consider potential harms to researchers and third parties, and assess whether these risks can be reasonably mitigated. Engaging with recommendations for fields such as terrorism research (e.g., Conway, 2021), work in authoritarian contexts (e.g., Acar et al., 2025) or harmful online content (Brown et al., 2026) can help to develop targeted mitigation strategies for ones' individual project.

Non-Interactive Research

In non-interactive research such as content analysis or working with digital trace data (see Chaps. 13 and 14), informed consent and direct incentivization are typically not possible. Thus, specific ethical challenges must be mitigated—specifically for processing personal data. Legal standards, such as the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), are strict when processing personal data (European Commission, 2018), due to risks for offline identities. These risks are particularly relevant when studying vulnerable groups such as minors or socially marginalised communities. At the same time, the GDPR and other applicable regulations, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), do enable personal data processing for legitimate purposes, including research (Di Minin et al., 2021). Researchers should thus explicitly demonstrate their research purpose and restrict data use to legitimate research cases.

An example of the different challenges around non-interactive research is the use of computational methods (including automated content

analysis, AI, web tracking, or network analysis) for studying alternative news. The DSA promises data access from Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPS); however, much alternative news circulates on smaller or alternative platforms that fall outside such regulation. Furthermore, research on systemic risks is prioritized, which can lead to further “unfair” research priorities.

Furthermore, data shared intentionally publicly (e.g., by alternative news creators) is considered more legitimate for study than private data (Di Minin et al., 2021). Yet, alternative news is often also shared in smaller or even private contexts. Researchers also often depend on platforms, which may grant access reluctantly (Bruns, 2019) or fail to provide crucially needed data (e.g., on the exposure to alternative news). Data donations can help secure consent and enable answering such questions, though distrust among alternative news users remains a barrier for representative samples (Boeschoten et al., 2022).

While not all risks associated with interactive and non-interactive research may be foreseeable, an adversarial mindset, a careful mapping (e.g., using the mapping tool by Eppert et al., 2022), and ethical review boards can help reflect on them before data collection begins. We also find it helpful to imagine the data collection would concern ourselves or relevant others, such as beloved parents, younger siblings, or close friends. In the sense of Kant’s imperative or the golden rule (Weiss, 1941), researchers might want to refrain from practices that they themselves do not wish to be subjected to.

DATA ANALYSIS

The general standards and routines for data analysis using qualitative, quantitative, and computational methods also apply to alternative news research. This includes storing research data in a privacy-protecting and secure manner, selecting appropriate methods to analyze the data, and carefully reflecting on the use of automated methods, specifically large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, as these often learn from the data they are fed.

There is, however, one specific challenge central to alternative news research: Alternative news outlets are often less common than mainstream news and used by a minority (Schulze, 2020). As a result, quantitative datasets comparing alternative news users to non-users are often imbalanced. To ensure accuracy, statistical analyses must incorporate robust

statistics and balancing techniques. The same holds for intercoder-reliability statistics in content analytical approaches: not all indicators are equally suited to work with rare categories (Brennan & Prediger, 1981). Even in qualitative analyses, imbalance can lead to overestimating associations due to psychological biases. The illusory correlation effect demonstrates that the co-occurrence of rare events in minority groups (e.g., extremist attitudes and alternative news users) leads to an overestimation of the perceived association between them, making them appear more strongly correlated than they actually are (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976).

Another challenge inherent in the small size of alternative news audiences is that there might not be enough research subjects to test quantitative hypotheses with adequate statistical precision. While recommendations for small-*n* research (Mahoney, 2000; Smith & Little, 2018), repeated measurement designs, and long-term studies exist, these approaches remain problematic for causal interpretations, and researchers should carefully reflect on the generalizability of their findings. Furthermore, engaging in open science practices becomes even more pivotal to enable other researchers to reuse one's data sets for secondary analyses.

According to UNESCO's European Commission (n.d), open science relates to scientific knowledge, infrastructure, exchange with other knowledge systems, and engagement with societal actors. For researchers, open science typically means sharing research expectations ("pre-registration"), materials, raw data, and analysis scripts (Dienlin et al., 2020). While quantitative, qualitative, and computational methods implement these principles differently (von Atteveldt, 2019; Dienlin et al., 2020), they all agree that open science enhances research accessibility and impact. Yet these benefits must be weighed against the aforementioned risks (e.g., due to labelling or privacy breaches). For example, qualitative interviews are often so rich that complete anonymization is not feasible, and social media researchers are typically not allowed to share their data. In both cases, researchers can restrict their open science routines to, for example, interview guides, codebooks, or analysis routines, or share simulated data sets.

PUBLISHING ABOUT ALTERNATIVE NEWS AND ITS USERS

The aforementioned ethical challenges, such as labelling, case selection, minority analyses, etc., also affect the publication process. Researchers should thus carefully elaborate on which materials, quotes, etc., should be included in their publications and what effect the inclusion could have.

This should also include carefully reflecting on materials that might adversely affect the audience (e.g., sensationalist but potentially trauma-reminding images, see Eppert et al., 2020). Furthermore, general practices of adequate interpretations should be followed (e.g., communicating effect sizes, avoiding unjustified causal language, discussing limitations thoroughly and critically, etc.). At the same time, some potentially stigmatizing findings may warrant publication due to their wider societal relevance (e.g., when studying anti-democratic alternative news producers). Here, researchers need to weigh carefully between the risks of reputational harm versus risks to the larger public good and we encourage them to discuss their considerations with their local ethical review boards.

Another risk is the homogenization of alternative news users. Research on activists, including those associated with progressive alternative news, reveals that when portrayed as a uniform, radical mass—whether by the media or law enforcement—they tend to identify more strongly with the movement’s radical aspects (Reicher, 2001). While a single scientific article is unlikely to have a significantly wide-reaching effect on average citizens or alternative news users, research may nonetheless contribute to similar dynamics when repeatedly portraying alternative news users as a homogeneous group. Such portrayals risk increasing distrust (Brems, 2024; Rauch, 2019) and unintentionally contributing to radicalization processes. We thus encourage researchers to carefully reflect about principles of care, fairness, and benevolence throughout their research process and ensure that these principles also guide their publication process.

Ethical challenges also emerge through science communication and its interaction with media coverage. News values like negativity can amplify sensational cases, leading to an overestimation of the impact of certain alternative news media. Depending on the broader political context, journalists may view alternative news as a competitor for audience attention and a threat to their reputation (Nygaard, 2023). Thus, researchers may also encounter pressures to adopt categorical normative labels (e.g., ‘misinformers,’ ‘racists,’ ‘extremists’) or to demonstrate distance from the individuals under study. Researchers should respond by restating the study’s operational definitions, evidence, and uncertainties, and by correcting mischaracterizations without adopting stigmatizing language or ignoring the larger impact their work can have on marginalised communities.

THREAT TO RESEARCHERS' WELL-BEING

Researching alternative news sources can pose significant risks to a researcher's well-being, particularly when engaging with alternative counter-news, their producers or audiences that promote conspiracy thinking, or extremist ideologies. Whittaker et al. (2025) categorize these threats into three categories: external harms, which include online or offline harms caused by third parties; internal harms, encompassing psychological or emotional distress; and professional harms, which impact career trajectories.

External harms primarily arise from interactions with hostile third parties, including online communities, extremist actors, or individuals who view research on alternative news sources as politically or ideologically threatening. In digital spaces, threats can, among others, take the form of hate emails, trolling, doxing, and even death threats (Whittaker et al., 2025). Researchers may also face personal attacks, including intimidation, privacy breaches in their offline live and vandalism (Blümel & Just, 2024; Seeger et al., 2024). While attacks and harassment are prevalent across research fields and topics (Blümel & Just, 2024; Seeger et al., 2024), studying alternative news as a politicized topic can be specifically risky.

External harms can also emerge during data collection, particularly in interactive research settings. For example, contacting participants with conspiracy worldviews can provoke hostile reactions. However, the highest risk typically arises in the dissemination phase, when findings are shared publicly (Obermaier et al., 2024). Scholars communicating research on controversial topics—such as alternative counter-media or spaces enabling the exchange of marginalised communities—may attract aggressive backlash (Blümel & Just, 2024). As visibility increases, so does the likelihood of becoming a target, with coordinated attacks threatening personal safety, discrediting researchers, and silencing critical scholarship. Further, such pressures have been shown to sometimes lead to silencing behaviour, as researchers restrict their academic communication out of fear of attacks (Seeger et al., 2024; Blümel & Just, 2024).

Researchers, including alternative news researchers, can also face internal harms in the form of psychological and emotional distress (Seeger et al., 2024) when studying dehumanising, extremist, or conspiracy-related alternative media. Exposure to distressing material, including violent and extremist content, can take a significant toll. Studies have shown that researchers working in such areas often report symptoms linked to

post-traumatic stress disorder, including intrusive thoughts, heightened anxiety, and even hallucinations (Whittaker et al., 2025). The emotional burden is not solely the result of consuming graphic content but also arises from the cumulative effects of navigating toxic online environments. Over time, some researchers may also struggle to disengage from their work. The blurring of professional and personal boundaries could allow distressing content to intrude into daily life, intensifying isolation (Whittaker et al., 2025). We thus echo the call of Brown et al. (2026) to extend the ethics of care to the care of researchers themselves, support collaborative work, and ensure that researchers are supported by their institutions and professional associations when needed.

Research on alternative news sources can also lead to professional harm. External and internal threats may prompt researchers to withdraw from their research topic of public engagement, thereby limiting visibility and avoiding controversial issues, as observed in authoritarian contexts (Acar et al., 2025). In fields where public dissemination is crucial for recognition and funding, self-censorship poses a significant risk to academic career trajectories (Whittaker et al., 2025).

Given the wide-ranging nature of these threats, research institutions must recognize researcher well-being as a key ethical issue (see also Brown et al., 2026). Ethical review boards should incorporate researcher safety considerations into their evaluation criteria, ensuring that scholars working on controversial topics receive adequate protection without hindering their research. Universities should establish protocols for responding to harassment, provide mental health support for those exposed to distressing content, and create institutional mechanisms that allow researchers to engage with their work without compromising their safety. Senior researchers are responsible for supporting early-career scholars by offering guidance on risk management and mental health strategies.

CONCLUSION

Studying alternative news is an ethically challenging endeavour, and there is no easy, one-size-fits-all solution to mitigate ethical concerns as individual normative positions, cultural embeddings and historical contexts will inevitably influence the answers to this challenge. Instead, ethical reflections should accompany the entire research circle. Studying alternative news is, first and foremost, research with humans. As such, it must adhere to ethical principles of self-determination, harm prevention,

beneficence, fairness, and justice for alternative news users, researchers, and society at large. Researchers make key decisions that shape this field, defining concepts, selecting cases, and determining how to balance potential harms against the public value of their work. Acknowledging this responsibility means being transparent about these choices—for example, by formulating clear criteria for case and method selection, documenting alternatives considered, or preregistering plans where appropriate. Such practices can help counterbalance the researcher’s interpretive power while keeping ethical principles at the centre of one’s work. We also recommend that researchers pay special attention to the risks associated with imprecise labelling, overlooking cases and contexts, contributing to stigmatization or mainstreaming, and potential adverse effects of alternative news exposure. These considerations should also inform data analysis, publication, and communication processes. Researching alternative news further can impact researchers’ well-being. Despite its importance, researcher safety is often overlooked in ethical evaluations. Mitigating these risks requires both proactive planning and ongoing monitoring throughout the research process. We have summarized the main questions researchers can ask themselves, along with the different ethical challenges in the research process, in a checklist, which can be accessed online (Frischlich & Schulze, 2024).

Acknowledgments Parts of the content of this chapter emerged from an ethics workshop funded in 2019 by the Center for Advanced Internet Studies in Bochum, Germany (for the respective report, see Eppert et al., 2020). This research was partially supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the framework of the program “Research for Civil Security” of the Federal Government (grant no. MOTRA-13N15223).

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How Do We Capture the User-Perspective? Strategies for Recruiting and Interviewing Users of Alternative Media

Miriam Kroman Brems

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of alternative media has left researchers grappling with questions about why parts of the population seek out alternatives to traditional sources of news and how they use and make sense of alternative media. To answer such questions, it is critical to include the users' perspectives. However, despite a more than four-decades long tradition, research into alternative media long neglected exploring their motivations and media practices (Atton, 2015; Schwarzenegger, 2021; but see Rauch, 2007, 2015). It is only recently that studies based on qualitative interviews with users of alternative media have begun filling this void. They have provided valuable insights into different aspects of alternative media use, including diverging motivations for and ways of using alternative

M. K. Brems (✉)

Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University,
Aarhus, Denmark

Centre for Journalism and Digital Democracy Centre, University of Southern
Denmark, Odense, Denmark

e-mail: brems@journalism.sdu.dk

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European
Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_11

media; how users combine alternative media with other sources of news; users' perceptions of bias in mainstream media and feelings of marginalization; and their critical views on immigration policies and political power-holders (Brems, 2024c, 2025; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021; Kosyk et al., 2023; Noppari et al., 2019; Peeters & Maesele, 2026; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022).

These studies demonstrate the relevance of interviewing alternative media users—and that doing so is feasible. However, this does not mean that capturing the user-perspective is straightforward. Several prior studies describe recruiting alternative media users for interviews as challenging and/or time-consuming. Reasons include lack of responses from contacted users (Brems, 2024c, Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger, 2021), suspicion of researchers' motives (Noppari et al., 2019), lacking trust in researchers, and concerns over being recruited to represent a certain group (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). Yet, accounts for steps taken to overcome these obstacles are often only sparsely described. While this likely owes to the limited space available in journal articles, it nonetheless means that knowledge about best recruitment practices is currently not accumulated (at least not in any formal way) and that researchers venturing into recruiting alternative media users for the first time find themselves without clear guidelines to lean on. The same can be said of what interview techniques should be employed to successfully facilitate interviews with a group known to be suspicious of societal institutions like news media and politicians (e.g., Brems, 2024b; Schulze, 2020) about practices and opinions they may feel are stigmatized (Brems, 2024c).

Against this backdrop, I begin this chapter by reviewing strategies for recruiting alternative media users employed in prior studies and evaluating the pros and cons of each as well as how to contact potential participants. After this, I discuss how to plan and conduct interviews with alternative media users and highlight qualitative news repertoire mappings and three associated card-sorting elements that are well-suited for facilitating talk about alternative media users' news use and for mitigating recall bias and social desirability bias. Finally, I discuss data quality issues and ethical dilemmas that can be relevant to consider when interviewing users of alternative media. Since these matters are often not given elaborate attention in journal articles, I especially draw on insights from my own prior research on users of alternative media in Denmark (2021–2024, see Brems 2024c), supplemented with available examples from other prior studies when possible.

STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USERS

Before the recruitment process can begin, researchers must first consider who belongs to the population of interest: Who counts as users of alternative media? Some studies take a media-centric approach and define the target group as users of specific news outlets identified as alternative media by the researchers based on certain criteria such as a self-proclaimed position as correctives of mainstream media or anti-systemic stances (e.g. Brems, 2025; Peeters & Maesele, 2026; Schwarzenegger 2021, 2023). Researchers could also take a user-centric approach and define the target group as people who consider themselves alternative media users, as is sometimes done in survey studies (e.g., Rauch, 2015; Steppat et al., 2023). Which approach is most suitable depends on the research question the study addresses.

A handful of prior studies that have shed light on alternative media users' motivations and practices departed from an interest in other phenomena or actors such as far-right online commenters (Ihlebak & Holter, 2021), immigration-critics (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022), or Covid-19 sceptics (Kosyk et al., 2023). Many participants in these studies used alternative media but were, notably, recruited based on other criteria. Therefore, these studies might have captured only a particular type of users (e.g., immigration-critical users). Irrespective of how the population of interest is defined, it should thus be kept in mind that this decision may influence the findings of the study.

According to some scholars, research participants should ideally be selected randomly from a list of potential participants—not to claim statistical generalizability but to ensure that the sample captures the variation within the group under study and avoid sampling bias (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p. 58-59). In practice, however, such lists are seldom available (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p. 60; Silverman, 2020, p. 61), why other steps must be taken. In the paragraphs below, I review sampling strategies employed in prior studies and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

Recruitment via Researchers' or Student Assistants' Networks

Several prior studies rely on recruitment via researchers' (Brems, 2024c, 2025; Noppari et al., 2019; Peeters & Maesele, 2026; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022) or student assistants' (Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023)

social networks. For example, Peeters and Maesele (2026) posted a call for participants with a survey link on the researchers' personal Facebook and Twitter pages. Participants were inquired about their use of alternative media and age, gender, and education, allowing the researchers to select a diverse sample (*ibid.*). In another study, Schwarzenegger (2021) asked student assistants whether they knew people who used the alternative media relevant to the study. In my own research (Brems, 2024c, 2025), I identified all my 'Facebook Friends' who liked or followed 12 selected Danish alternative media and asked a subset of them whether they could mediate contact to acquaintances who used the same alternative media.

Recruiting participants via researchers' or students' social networks has the evident weakness that the selection of interviewees depends on who forms part of the given persons' networks. However, in some cases, such procedures may be the only way of gaining initial access to the desired group under study, after which the first participants might lead to others.

Recruitment via Alternative Media

Another strategy employed in prior studies is recruiting via alternative media (Brems, 2024c, 2025; Peeters & Maesele, 2026). In my study, for example, I asked the alternative media whose users I wanted to interview to share a call for participants with their readers or let me post it on their Facebook pages. To minimise the required effort from their side, and to retain control of how the research project was described, I attached a text they could share.

This strategy has the advantage that recruitment is not influenced by who forms part of the social networks of researchers or students (or interviewees). Furthermore, disseminating a call for participants via alternative media's communication channels increases chances of reaching the target group. Moreover, participating in a research project might be deemed more acceptable by the users if the call is shared by alternative media they use.

However, the strategy also has some notable downsides. First, getting in touch with alternative media is not necessarily an easy task (see also Noppari et al., 2019) as contact information is not always provided. Second, its success depends on the cooperation of alternative media. In my study, five of 12 outlets I contacted agreed to share the request for participants or let me post it on their Facebook-pages'

community-sections. Notably, my study was set in Denmark. In countries where alternative media position themselves further from the media-political mainstream, these actors might be less inclined to collaborate with researchers.

Third and related, which alternative media choose (not) to collaborate determines what interviewees may be accessed. Researchers should critically assess whether there is any systematic skew in what types of outlets share the call for participants as this can impact the composition of the sample and, ultimately, the findings of the study. Fourth, researchers must be aware that alternative media might seek to influence the recruitment process. Finally, this strategy relies on self-selection, the disadvantages of which are discussed below.

Recruitment Based on Observed Online Behaviour

A third recruitment strategy identifies potential interviewees based on their publicly observable behaviour online (Brems, 2024c, 2025; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). For example, Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou (2022) identified immigration-critics (the focus of their study) based on engagement in public debates on immigration, and Schwarzenegger (2021, 2023) contacted users who had engaged with alternative media on social media, e.g. by liking, commenting, or sharing their content. To exemplify how this can be done in a systematic way, I manually copy-pasted links to all Facebook-profiles that had reacted to one or more of five selected alternative media's most recent Facebook-posts, resulting in a database of 5044 potential interviewees. I randomly selected 155 who were invited to participate via Facebook Messenger (for elaboration, see Brems, 2024c).

Like recruitment via alternative media, this strategy has the advantage that the composition of the sample is not influenced by the social networks of researchers, students, or interviewees. Furthermore, it is less influenced by self-selection since it is randomized what users from the database are invited to participate (but see section on self-selection bias below).

However, it has the limitation that it can only capture users who actively engage with the selected alternative media on the selected social media platform(s). Consequently, 'invisible' users who only view content without engaging (Bird, 2011) will not be represented in the sample. Importantly, such lurkers make up the majority of media users (ibid.). Likewise, the strategy cannot capture alternative media users who do not

use social media. Finally, the strategy is time-consuming, both in terms of creating the database and contacting potential interviewees individually. Illustrating the latter, only 11 of the 155 potential interviewees I contacted agreed to participate.

Recruitment via Snowball Sampling

A final sampling strategy employed in studies of alternative media users is snowball sampling where users interviewed so far mediate contact to other users (Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). This strategy can be effective for recruiting more users once you have your foot inside. As a further advantage, participants who have already been interviewed might lead researchers to types of users not captured by the other recruitment strategies discussed, such as less engaged users. However, it has the weakness that interviewees initially recruited influence who is subsequently recruited, either simply based on whom they know or, potentially, based on (undisclosed) motivations for leading researchers to specific participants.

Self-Selection Bias in the Sampling Strategies

Irrespective of which of the recruitment strategies discussed researchers employ, they must consider whether the resulting sample is impacted by self-selection bias. The term refers to the issue that people who opt into research studies may be qualitatively different from other potential participants on important parameters (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p. 64). For instance, alternative media users who choose to participate may be more dedicated or hold stronger attitudes towards news media or political issues.

This problem especially pertains to recruitment via alternative media where participants must actively respond to a call for interviewees. The issue is somewhat mitigated by recruitment based on observed behaviour on social media, partly because potential interviewees are contacted directly with an invitation to participate (rather than having to volunteer), partly because it is randomised who is invited (among the potential interviewees in the database, with the limitations discussed above). However, as evidenced by the low response rate in my own study, there is still a notable element of opting in among those invited. Similarly, when recruiting based on researchers', students', or prior interviewees' social networks, there may be a bias in who accepts the invitation to participate.

While researchers should be mindful of potential self-selection bias, it must be stressed that this issue is difficult to avoid entirely and that findings from studies impacted by some degree of self-selection bias are preferable to no findings at all (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p. 64).

***Making Contact: Trust-Building, Transparency,
and Safety Concerns***

As part of the recruitment process, researchers must carefully contemplate how to approach potential participants. One central consideration is how much information about the research project potential participants should receive: While research should be conducted in accordance with ideals of informed consent, some information might influence participants' behaviour and invalidate research findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). When contacting participants, researchers must for instance decide whether to use the term 'alternative media' (Brems, 2024c; Peeters & Maesele, 2026). Using the term might create misalignment with or influence users' perceptions of the media they use whereas omitting it means interviewees might be unaware that they will be studied as representatives of a certain group (alternative media users). Here, transparency about the research purpose, which can also be crucial for building trust, and the risk of 'tainting' research results must carefully be weighed against each other.

When recruiting via social media, another central consideration is whether researchers should contact potential participants via their private profile or create a separate profile for this (Brems, 2024c). Speaking in favour of the former, using your private profile might better build trust as it signals that you have nothing to hide and that you trust potential interviewees will not misuse their knowledge of your private profile. Speaking in favour of the latter, a separate profile can protect the researcher against potential harassment. Such concerns are particularly relevant if studying users of extreme alternative media: Studies of far-right groups have pointed out that they tend to treat researchers as hostile and, in some cases, intimidate researchers with threats of violence (Blee, 2007; Colley & Moore, 2022). Here, personal transparency as a way of building trust must thus be weighed against researchers' (feelings of) personal safety.

To avoid being met with suspicion, researchers making direct contact with potential participants should clearly state how they have identified them—e.g. based on liking a post from an alternative news site or that another interviewee recommended contacting them.

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USERS

Many pieces of advice found in general guides for doing qualitative interviews also pertain to planning and conducting interviews with alternative media users. This includes developing an interview guide with questions or themes each interview must cover and general interview techniques like moving from open to direct questions, prompting and probing, and active listening (for thorough guides, see Gerson & Damaske, 2020; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Below, I highlight considerations and techniques that are particularly relevant when interviewing alternative media users.

Where to Do the Interviews

A practical, yet important, question is where to conduct the interviews. This requires extra consideration when interviewing a group that may be suspicious of researchers and societal institutions (see above). Ideally, the setting should make interviewees feel comfortable (David & Sutton, 2004, p. 90). Therefore, it can be a good idea to let the interviewee decide whether the interview should take place in their private home, in a public place (e.g., a café, a library), or at the university. However, if the researcher does not feel comfortable interviewing the participant alone in their private home, choosing another location or bringing along another interviewer can be good solutions. Researchers conducting interviews in a public place must ensure that the selected location allows the interviewee to speak freely (especially when interviews cover sensitive topics), does not compromise the interviewee's anonymity, and does not create practical problems such as interruptions or background noise. Generally, in-person interviews are preferable (Gerson & Damaske 2020, p. 132) but when not feasible, telephone or online interviews are alternative solutions.

Tackling Researcher Biases and Interviewee Inconsistencies

Before and during interviews, researchers should always review their own assumptions and prejudices about the topic and people studied (Miller & Crabtree, 2004; Fog, 2004/2004). This is particularly important when researching a group like users of alternative media, whose sometimes hostile portrayals of news media and politicians and advocacy of extreme or populist agendas (e.g. Brems, 2023; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019) may

be far from aligned with researchers' own views. The goal of a self-review is not to rid oneself of opinions but to become conscious of them and strive to set them aside (Gerson & Damaske 2020, p. 124). Techniques that can support this during interviews are asking open questions, listening respectfully and non-judgmentally to participants, asking curious follow-ups, refraining from evaluating participants' stances, and giving interviewees a chance to explain what they mean instead of assuming that you know (*ibid.*, pp. 124–126). Regarding the latter, researchers can use interpretive questions like 'what do you mean by...?' or summarize interviewees' points during the interviews, e.g. 'what I hear you say is that [...], is that correctly understood?' (see e.g., David & Sutton, 2004; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 188–191).

Strategic use of interview questions can also alleviate biases in participants' accounts. Interviewees' opinions may conflict with their self-image and/or daily practices (Gerson & Damaske 2020, p. 76). To avoid that interviewees give false or incomplete accounts of *what* they do to create alignment with their stated attitudes and beliefs, it can be helpful to ask descriptive questions about their actions before other questions (*ibid.*). Similarly, interviewees should be asked *what* they do before *why* they do it (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 188).

With respect to misalignment between interviewees' reported behaviour and stated beliefs (or other inconsistencies), it should be noted that self-contradictions do not necessarily mirror attempts at deceiving the interviewer but may also reflect ambivalence. Researchers should pay attention to self-contradictions and inquire interviewees about them (Small & Cook, 2023), which may unlock new insights. In my study, for example, I directly asked interviewees why they used specific mainstream media that they stated were untrustworthy. This revealed a plethora of reasons such as difficulty finding alternatives, belief in own abilities to filter biases, or that they only considered parts of the news coverage biased (Brems, 2025).

Using Card-Sorting Elements to Facilitate Interviews

Qualitative studies of alternative media users often focus on why they seek out alternatives to mainstream media and how they use them (e.g., Brems, 2025; Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023). The following paragraphs outline qualitative mappings of news repertoires and three associated card-sorting elements that are helpful for facilitating talk about

use and perceptions of news media. The techniques described are heavily inspired by those presented by Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012) and Merten (2020) with minor adjustments to fit the specific study of alternative media users (Brems, 2024c, 2025).

To map interviewees' news repertoires, the researcher can begin by asking—openly and descriptively—what sources of news and information they use in their daily lives. To mitigate recall bias, i.e. that people can have difficulties remembering their own actions (Small & Cook, 2023), the researcher can encourage interviewees to chronologically describe their news use the day before. Each source of news and information mentioned is written on a blank card and placed on the table between interviewer and interviewee. A relevant consideration is whether the cards should be written by the interviewee or the researcher. Letting the interviewees write can give them control and offer insights into how they think of their news use (e.g., do they write names of specific sources or types of media, Merten, 2020). However, some interviewees may find it difficult to write and talk at the same time or feel embarrassed about misspellings, in which case the researcher can write the names of the sources the interviewees name (Brems, 2024c).

The foremost advantage of this card-sorting element is that it can facilitate talk about the interviewees' news use. For instance, interviewees can be invited to talk about why they use the sources they mention, their perceptions of them, on what platforms they seek them out, when they first started using them, how often they use them, what makes them click article links, specific topics of interest, etc., comparable to think-aloud protocols (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). Additionally, the cards with names of news sources give cognitive relief for both interviewee and researcher as they offer a visualisation of otherwise complex patterns of news use. They also provide common ground that the rest of the interview can be based on and make it easy for the researcher to direct the conversation towards use or perceptions of specific news sources. (For further discussion of advantages of repertoire mappings, see Merten, 2020).

As a supplement or alternative to the exercise with the blank cards, the researcher can ask interviewees to shuffle through a deck of cards with logos of alternative and mainstream media (or other news sources) (Brems, 2024c). This card-sorting element has three advantages. First, it can stimulate interviewees' recollection. Second, it can reduce social desirability bias (Small & Cook, 2023; Tavory, 2020): Using alternative media might be taboo for some interviewees and presenting logos of alternative and

mainstream media side by side may help signal that using alternative media is not abnormal. Third, shuffling through the deck of logos can facilitate talk about news sources the interviewees do *not* use.

In a subsequent step, the researcher can invite interviewees to place the cards with news sources they use in three concentric circles according to their importance for them (inspired by Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Merten, 2020). By asking interviewees to explain why they place the cards as they do, this third card-sorting element can facilitate talk about their perception of the relative importance of the sources of news they use. Furthermore, this exercise produces visual insight into how the interviewees themselves understand the structure of their news repertoires (Brems, 2025; Merten, 2020). As such, card-sorting elements can both serve as strategies for facilitating talk but also produce data in themselves. Researchers should thus make sure to not only record the sound of the interview but also document the card-sorting elements, e.g. with photographs or video-recordings (naturally with permission from interviewees).

Administering the card-sorting elements described is doubtlessly easiest if the interviews are conducted in person. Alternatively, online programs allowing participants to write names of news outlets on the screen and place them in concentric circles can be used (if interviewing fairly technically skilled users) and the repertoire maps be documented with screen-recordings or screenshots.

INTERVIEWEES WITH AGENDAS AND IMBALANCED POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Users of alternative media are highly interested in politics and hold stronger ideological/political attitudes than the rest of the population (e.g., Brems, 2024a; Schulze, 2020). Therefore, researchers must be aware that some participants might hope to leverage the interviews for furthering specific agendas. Exemplifying this, several participants in my study (Brems, 2024c) directly stated that they viewed the interviews as a chance to make heard their political views and criticism of mainstream media, and one even suggested a particular objective of the study: “[...] this research project must have as its purpose to prove that the alternative media have emerged because of the censorship in established media” (Interview 11).

Such statements should prompt researchers to carefully consider whether relaying the interviewees' views risks inadvertently turning the research into advocacy in favour of certain agendas. As pointed out by Colley and Moore (2022), reproducing extreme content in research studies might further circulate it and the same may be said of alternative media users' attitudes towards media and politics. While this is a relevant concern, I take the position that it is possible to reflect the political views and criticism of the media and political mainstream voiced by users of alternative media—which are crucial for understanding their motivations for using them—without promoting these views and while critically probing their merit and evaluating their potential societal consequences. (For a more elaborate discussion of whether research should give voice to extreme views, see Chap. 10 in this volume).

Furthermore, researchers must consider whether interviewees' accounts can be treated as genuine or whether they consciously try to paint an advantageous picture of alternative media users, e.g. by holding back certain opinions to appear less extreme. In cases where some interviewees explicitly state certain motives for participating, this can be assessed by comparing the views they voice in interviews to those of other interviewees. In my study (Brems, 2024c), the former group expressed some of the most severe criticism of media and politicians and the most extreme political views, indicating that they did not act strategically to paint a picture of alternative media users as less extreme. If interviewees keep their motives covert, this issue is more difficult to deal with.

Importantly, participants with specific agendas should not only be seen as a risk to the soundness of the interview data but also as a reminder of researchers' ethical obligations towards their research subjects. Interviewees spend time, volunteer data (Miles et al., 2014, p. 60), and confide in the researcher, possibly with the hope that the research project will create a platform for desired change. While it is by no means the role of researchers to fulfil such aspirations, researchers have an ethical obligation not to install false hopes of what alternative media users might gain from participating.

Along the same lines, researchers should bear in mind that the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is asymmetrical. The researcher chooses the themes, asks the questions, and decides when to end the conversation with little possibility for the interviewee to prompt the researcher questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 56). While the interviewees decide what they share with the interviewer, some may end up giving

more of themselves than intended. For example, some participants in my study (Brems, 2024c) expressed gratitude that they finally had someone to confide in as they felt they could not discuss their views on media and politics with their friends, families, or colleagues. Similarly, Ihlebæk and Holter reported that their interviews with far-right online commenters lasted three hours on average because the interviewees “felt the need to talk ‘their hearts out’” (2021, p. 1213). Furthermore, it is the researcher alone who has the right to interpret the interview afterwards (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 56), and findings reported could potentially marginalize or damage the reputation of alternative media users as a group (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 226; Miles et al., 2014, p. 61).

This power structure is not necessarily one that the researcher should try to—or can—do anything about, nor should potential damage to the group’s reputation stand in the way of publishing important research insights. However, the power-imbalance does warrant awareness of the researchers’ ethical responsibilities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 57) and the benefits of the research insights should always be weighed against the ideal of striving to do no harm (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 56–59). Finally, researchers must be careful to protect the anonymity of interviewees, e.g. when deciding what quotes and how much background information about participants are included in the write-up.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed four strategies for recruiting alternative media users for interviews and discussed potentials and pitfalls associated with each. Importantly, they should not be considered competing but, rather, complementary strategies. Reflecting this, many prior studies rely on a mix of the strategies discussed (e.g., Brems, 2024c, 2025; Peeters & Maesele, 2026; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). By combining different approaches, researchers increase chances of obtaining a sufficiently large sample and, more importantly, can leverage the strengths of each and compensate for their respective weaknesses. For instance, researchers may begin by recruiting users based on their online engagement with alternative media and then supplement with snowball sampling and ask initial interviewees to point towards less engaged users not captured by the first strategy. Combining different strategies can thus increase chances of obtaining perspectives from different types of

alternative media users, thereby better capturing the perspectives of the group as a whole and the heterogeneity of the group under study (Silverman, 2020, p. 76).

The chapter has also addressed a number of dilemmas researchers may face, including how to weigh ideals of transparency, interviewees' comfort, researchers' (feelings of) personal safety, and the need for trust-building against each other, as well as central considerations about data quality and ethics. The aim is not to prescribe the right solution to these matters but to invite researchers to carefully reflect on them when planning, conducting, and reporting findings from interviews with alternative media users. While the chapter has discussed these issues in relation to alternative media users, the points made are also relevant to other research fields studying groups that may be difficult to access, suspicious of researchers, and have their own objectives with participating in research studies, such as far-right communities (see e.g. Blee, 2007, Colley & Moore, 2022).

The chapter departed from the observation that strategies for recruiting and interviewing alternative media users are often only sparsely described. This has the consequence that knowledge about how to best do this is currently not accumulated in the research community. In this chapter, I have attempted to begin this process by drawing on examples from my own and others' prior work. Accordingly, I will end with a strong encouragement that we—the alternative media research community—collectively continue the effort by thoroughly documenting how we recruit participants, build trust, protect researchers' safety, plan and carry out interviews with users of alternative media, and handle ethical dilemmas. Although article formats often do not lend the necessary space, this can be done in online supplementary materials—and doing so is necessary for further strengthening our methods for studying this important group of news users.

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Capturing Alternative News Use through Surveys: Measurement Challenges and Implications

*Lena Zils, Florian Wintterlin, Julia Metag, Niels G. Mede,
and Mike S. Schäfer*

INTRODUCTION

How individuals engage with alternative media has been examined using several different approaches such as tracking-based (de León et al., 2024; Müller & Bach, 2021) or qualitative studies (e.g. Schwarzenegger, 2023; Brems, 2025). In this chapter, we focus on survey-based approaches as the most common way to measure media use. For survey research, measuring alternative media use presents particularly complex methodological

L. Zils (✉) • F. Wintterlin • J. Metag

Department of Communication, University of Münster, Münster, Germany
e-mail: lena.zils@uni-muenster.de

N. G. Mede

Strategic Communication Group, Wageningen University & Research,
Wageningen, Netherlands

M. S. Schäfer

Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich,
Zurich, Switzerland

challenges that go beyond the already difficult task of capturing regular news consumption in today's high-choice media environment (Cardenal et al., 2022).

These challenges stem from multiple interconnected factors. First, the definitional complexity of alternative media creates fundamental measurement problems, as researchers and audiences could operate with different understandings of what constitutes "alternative media" (Klawier et al., 2023; Rauch, 2023; Steppat et al., 2023). Second, the fluidity of the alternative news landscape poses unique challenges, as outlets tend to emerge and disappear more rapidly than mainstream outlets, making outlet-based lists quickly outdated. Third, the relatively small numbers of alternative media users in representative surveys create statistical challenges, requiring large sample sizes for sufficient statistical power. Fourth, social desirability bias may influence responses differently depending on the measurement approach used, given the politically charged nature of many alternative media outlets.

These fundamental challenges are compounded by more specific methodological issues. Single-item measures often fail to capture the complexity of alternative media consumption (Castro et al., 2022; Steppat et al., 2023), while multi-item scales struggle with construct validity across different cultural contexts (Barthel et al., 2020). The lack of standardized measurement tools results in researchers using varying operationalizations, making it difficult to assess the true scope of alternative media use (Klawier, 2024) or conduct meaningful meta-analyses.

To address these methodological challenges, this chapter examines and compares different survey-based approaches to measure alternative media use. Our focus is explicitly outlet-bound, focusing on the use of specific news outlets rather than gratification-bound measures. We specifically focus on the distinction between more inductive user-defined measurements and more deductive, researcher-imposed preselection approaches (see also Klawier, 2024). By testing both approaches within the same sample, we demonstrate that these measurements not only yield different results but actually capture distinct types of alternative media users.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND USERS IN DEFINING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

The measurement challenges outlined above are rooted in fundamental differences between how researchers and audiences conceptualize alternative media. Understanding this divide is crucial for developing appropriate measurement strategies.

From a research perspective, alternative media are often perceived from a relational perspective, which defines alternative media primarily in contrast to mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). The distinction can be externally ascribed by observers such as scholars or the general public, but it can also be an integral part of an outlet's self-definition communicated to its audience. Crucially, most scholars conceptualize alternative media not as a binary category but rather as a spectrum (Kenix, 2011). This perspective is particularly relevant in digital environments, where publishing is not contingent on professional infrastructure (Rauch, 2016).

Researchers typically analyse alternative media along two key dimensions: form and content (Mayerhöffer, 2021). The form dimension pertains to how outlets produce and distribute their content, encompassing financial structures, organizational processes, and journalists' role perception (Atton, 2004; Downing, 2001). The content dimension focuses on the messages alternative media disseminate, including critique of mass media, amplification of marginalized voices, and mobilization efforts within social movements (Klawier et al., 2023). A second key characteristic emphasized by researchers is alternative media's corrective function—their aim to fill perceived gaps in public discourse by providing missing information or underrepresented perspectives (Frischlich et al., 2023).

From the audience perspective, however, the picture looks different. In surveys examining audience perceptions, considerations of content tend to outweigh concerns of form (Rauch, 2015). Respondents frequently classify outlets as alternative that, from a research perspective, would not meet that criterion due to their corporate ownership or profit-driven nature (Klawier et al., 2023; Rauch, 2015; Steppat et al., 2023). Nevertheless, media users—at least within the same cultural context—generally share a common understanding of the defining characteristics of alternative media (Rauch, 2015), suggesting that oppositional content holds greater significance than structural aspects.

This research-user divide in defining alternative media directly translates into measurement challenges. Researcher-imposed measurements

based on structural or scholarly definitions may miss outlets that audiences consider alternative, while user-oriented approaches may include outlets that scholars would classify as mainstream. Similarly, audiences perceive media along a continuum of alternativeness (Steppat et al., 2023) which suggests that binary measurement approaches may oversimplify the complexity of alternative media use patterns.

These definitional complexities, combined with the measurement challenges discussed earlier, highlight why robust measurement of alternative media use requires careful consideration of both theoretical frameworks and practical constraints. The following sections examine how different measurement approaches handle these challenges and what implications emerge for understanding alternative media use patterns.

SURVEY-BASED APPROACHES TO MEASURE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USE

To classify measures of alternative media use, we differentiate between a researcher-imposed preselection and measures based on users' definitions of alternative media. By *users' definition* of alternative media, we mean questions and items that provide a global definition of alternative media but do not give any examples of alternative outlets (e.g., Castro et al., 2022; Steppat et al., 2023), often oriented towards the idea of alternative media as corrective of traditional news media (Frischlich et al., 2023). For example, Steppat et al. (2023) ask respondents: "Some people are disappointed by political news coverage and have the feeling that the (most frequently used) mainstream media sources do not report information fully. As a result, these people seek out alternative sources of information (e.g. they may seek out sources on the Internet where they can find their opinion better represented or can cross-check information). Do you belong to this group?" (p. 751). Another option to examine the user's definition of alternative media is to provide an open-ended question, where they can name alternative media outlets they use (e.g., Klawier et al., 2023; Rauch, 2019; Steppat et al., 2023). For example, Rauch (2019) asked the respondents to name their "favourite alternative media." (Rauch, 2019, p. 27). Open-ended questions are usually analysed by coding the mentioned alternative media outlets and categorizing them, for example by checking the self-descriptions of the outlets (Steppat et al., 2023).

In contrast to inductive approaches to measure alternative media use, there are several studies that ask for alternative media use by providing any form of *researcher-imposed preselection*. This kind of measuring alternative media use can closely align with user-oriented measurements by simply adding examples of alternative media to open questions (e.g., Brosius & Peter, 2021; Rauch, 2015; Viehmann et al., 2020). These survey items remain focused on the general use of alternative media and require respondents to deduce which media outlets qualify as alternative media and which do not.

Measures following a stricter researcher-imposed preselection use a check-all or a list-frequency approach (Klawier, 2024). The check-all approach presents respondents with a set of media outlets, platforms, or content types and asks them to select all that they recognize or have used. The list-frequency approach not only provides respondents with a pre-defined list of alternative media outlets or actors but also asks them to indicate how frequently they engage with each.

Both, check-all and list frequencies approaches can aim to measure different channels of alternative media content. Some studies apply these approaches to specific content classified as alternative media, asking respondents to recall whether they have seen or discussed particular news items (Frischlich et al., 2020). Others focus on outlet-based categorization, presenting lists of media organizations (Hölig et al., 2020; Klawier et al., 2023; Lee, 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014; Müller and Schulz, 2021; Rauch, 2015; Shehata and Strömbäck, 2022; Viehmann et al., 2020; Winterlin et al., 2023) or influential individuals—such as ‘alternative’ influencers—who play a key role in shaping public discourse (Hetzl et al., 2022, p. 519).

ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS OF RESEARCHER-IMPOSED AND USER-ORIENTED MEASURES

The overview of various measurements of alternative media use and definitions of alternative media by both researchers and users has shown that the fundamental methodological approach differs significantly depending on whether researchers define alternative media themselves or leave the definition to respondents. While this is not a dichotomous decision and intermediate approaches exist, it has implications for the reliability of measurement and the identification of individuals as alternative media

users. In the following section, we examine the different methodological strategies, discussing their respective advantages and pitfalls (see also Table 12.1). Our primary focus will be on the strengths and weaknesses of approaches aimed at quantifying alternative media use. However, it is important to note that not all studies included in this review are designed to quantify use; some instead aim to explore how users themselves define what constitutes alternative media.

User-Oriented Measures

User-oriented measurements using open-ended questions that include definitions or examples are able to capture most accurately what users perceive as alternative media use. These measurements are not restricted to what researchers define as alternative media and instead reflect the diverse landscape of alternative media as experienced by users. However,

Table 12.1 Typology of survey-based measures of alternative media use

<i>Measurement Type</i>	<i>Question Format</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Literature</i>
User-oriented	Open-ended	Respondents name media outlets they perceive as alternative without any predefined options.	Klawier et al. (2023); Rauch (2019); Steppat et al. (2023)
User-oriented	Closed-ended (with general definition)	Respondents assess whether they use alternative media based on a broad definition without examples.	Steppat et al. (2023)
Researcher-imposed	Open-ended (with examples)	Open-ended questions that include examples or framing defined by the researcher to guide interpretation.	Brosius & Peter (2021); Rauch (2015)
Researcher-imposed	Closed-ended (check-all)	Respondents are presented with a predefined list of outlets and asked to select those they recognize or use.	Klawier (2024); Hölig et al. (2020); Müller & Schulz (2021); Viehmann et al. (2020); Rauch (2015)
Researcher-imposed	Closed-ended (list-frequency)	Respondents are presented with a predefined list of outlets and indicate how often they use each one.	Klawier (2024); Wintterlin et al. (2023); Hetzel et al. (2022)

there are several pitfalls for studies reliably trying to capture alternative media use relying on user-oriented measurements.

First, the term alternative media is interpreted differently by respondents, making it challenging to compare individuals both within and across cultures. The general issue with self-reports—namely, that respondents may interpret key terms differently than researchers—is amplified in the context of alternative media because the term is appropriated by very different groups in society (Klawier et al., 2023). What is considered an alternative media is highly dependent on the social and cultural context in which individuals live. Empirical evidence suggests that simply asking about alternative media without defining the term results in unreliable results because respondents for example define tabloids such as *Bild* (Klawier et al., 2023) or even mainstream media such as *Fox News* (Steppat et al., 2023) as alternative media. This might be dependent on the social context as the immediate social environment that shapes people’s day-to-day experiences (Burke et al., 2009). For example, partisanship or the identification with social groups in general might influence what people perceive to be alternative media (Klawier et al., 2023; Rauch, 2019). Especially in polarized political systems, people tend to perceive even mainstream media as alternative media, partly because the content of mainstream media incorporates elements of alternative media such as opinion-based narratives and emotional reporting (Steppat et al., 2023). This different understanding of alternative media is even more problematic when comparing alternative media users across countries and cultures (Steppat et al., 2023). National contexts and the political system are decisive for what is perceived as alternative media (e.g. Lee, 2015). Giving definitions of alternative media before asking about their usage on a frequency scale only partially solves the problem. Research comparing different measures of alternative media use (Klawier et al., 2023) showed that surveys using definitions such as “media offerings that describe themselves as alternatives” (Obermaier et al., 2023, p. 864) result in higher reported usage than any other measurement raising doubt about their validity.

Second, whether individuals report using alternative media in open-ended questions depends on the data collection method of the survey and the respondents’ perception of the researcher’s stance on alternative media. Social desirability bias can work in both directions—some respondents might underreport their alternative media use due to perceived stigma as disseminators of disinformation, while others might overreport it to signal their critical stance toward mainstream media (Eveland et al.,

2009; Klawier, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that the data collection method influences the frequency with which respondents report their use of alternative media. In particular, respondents in online surveys report significantly higher levels of exposure (Klawier, 2024).

Third, if alternative media use is measured by asking respondents to openly name the outlets they use and perceive as alternative, the diversity of responses to such open-ended questions necessitates a re-coding process that ultimately depends on the researcher's definition of alternative media. The share of alternative media users identified through such measures is similar to tracking or outlet-based measurements (Büchel et al., 2016; Humprecht et al., 2022). However, these measures only postpone the decision of what is defined as alternative media from the researcher's perspective from the creation of the questionnaire to the coding of the open answers. Nonetheless, this approach represents a combination of user-oriented measurement and researcher-imposed interpretation, avoiding some of the drawbacks of open-ended measures while still allowing for a degree of openness to respondents' interpretations.

Researcher-Imposed Measures

As demonstrated above, researcher-imposed measures can take various forms, ranging from open-ended questions that include researcher-defined examples of alternative media to outlet-based measurements. Both approaches have the advantage of increasing congruence between the researcher's and respondent's definitions of alternative media. However, they also introduce potential biases and limitations that must be carefully considered when studying alternative media use.

First, anchor examples such as naming extreme (far-right and far-left) or typical outlets in single-item measurements increase clarity but carry the risk of limitations due to a lack of familiarity with the mentioned outlets or aversions toward them. Compared to user-oriented measurements, anchor examples have been shown to result in lower reported usage (Barthel et al., 2020). Partly because they prime respondents to consider only a specific type of alternative media, potentially leading them to overlook others. This issue is particularly pronounced when only extreme outlets are provided as examples (Klawier, 2024). Additionally, compared to more specific outlet-based measurements, open-ended questions that include examples still identify relatively high numbers of alternative media users (Klawier, 2024).

Second, outlet-based measurements are restricted to a small number of outlets in the field of alternative media. Outlet-based measurements such as check-all or list-frequency approaches contain a researcher-based preselection of outlets that have been identified as alternative by previous research or the researchers themselves. These measures ensure that the understanding of alternative media is congruent between researcher and respondent. However, they are necessarily limited to a small number of alternative media outlets. This might result in underreporting of the actual alternative media use because not all outlets in the field of alternative media can be captured and because the field of alternative media (and alternative platforms as well) is changing rapidly (Lievrouw, 2023, Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Empirically, check-all measures result in the lowest share of alternative media users compared to other measures of alternative media use (Klawier, 2024), also compared to list-frequency approaches that involve a forced choice. This may be due to the fact that the threshold for reporting the use of certain media offerings is higher when only a dichotomous choice is available rather than a gradual scale.

Taken together, our findings indicate that all measurement approaches face challenges in reliably identifying alternative media users. While the choice of a specific measurement depends on the research question, scholars must acknowledge that what counts as alternative media varies considerably between researchers and users, as well as among users themselves. This variation directly influences who is classified as an alternative media user. Comparing different identification approaches, initial evidence suggests that user-oriented measurements yield significantly higher estimates of alternative media use than researcher-imposed measurements (Klawier, 2024; Zils et al., 2025). In the case of Switzerland, Zils et al. (2025) showed that 72.2% of the respondents reported using what they personally perceived as alternative media for information on science, whereas only 26% indicated using one of the media outlets predefined as alternative by the researchers.¹ This large discrepancy suggests that both measurements capture systematically different types of alternative media users.

¹ Using tracking-based studies as a benchmark, 15% of the Swiss population could be classified as alternative media users (de León et al., 2024).

COMPARING PEOPLE IDENTIFIED AS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA USERS BY RESEARCHER-IMPOSED AND USER-ORIENTED MEASURES

So far, we have identified the pitfalls and advantages of different measures to measure alternative media use in surveys and how the descriptive share of people identified as alternative media users differ depending on the measurement. Further, we argue that people identified as alternative media users by researcher-imposed and user-oriented measures differ significantly regarding their attitudes, sociodemographics and their media use.

To provide evidence, we conducted a secondary analysis of data from the “Science Barometer Switzerland,” a nationally representative survey of attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about science and research in Switzerland ($N = 1122$; age: $M = 47.70$ years; $SD = 18.05$; gender: 49.2% female; education: 58.2% post-secondary education) surveyed in 2022.²

Hence, we apply our considerations to the case of alternative *science* media use. Alternative news media not only cover originally political issues; they also explore other topics, such as scientific matters (Rooke, 2021), offering alternative epistemic positions and purported evidence that challenges mainstream scientific consensus. This is especially relevant in the context of what Neuberger et al. (2023) describe as an epistemic crisis, previously conceptualized as a “post-truth society” (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), where competing truth claims and alternative facts circulate.

Switzerland, the case under investigation, has a media landscape that includes various publications that position themselves as offering counterperspectives to what they characterize as dominant interpretations found in conventional media outlets (Porlezza, 2024). These alternative news sources span the political spectrum, with representatives from both progressive and conservative orientations (Schwaiger, 2022).

To determine whether respondents use alternative media for information about science and research, the survey combined a measurement focusing on the user’s perception and a researcher-imposed preselection. The survey started by introducing the concept of alternative media as follows: “Some people are dissatisfied with the reporting of traditional media. They have the feeling that certain topics are neglected or that information

²The survey data and additional materials (e.g., the questionnaires and a methodological report; the former is in German, French, and Italian, while the latter is only in German) are publicly available in the online repository SWISSUbase (doi: 10.48573/wpf5-hf36).

is presented incompletely, one-sidedly or distorted. That's why people use alternative sources of information that they feel report more impartially than traditional media." After this brief introduction, the survey asked on a scale from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently "How frequently do you encounter science and research information through alternative sources?". Following this self-perception measurement, alternative media users can be considered as individuals who use alternative media at least occasionally, starting from a level of 2. Conversely, non-users are those who never use alternative media. This query acted as a filter question.

Afterwards, the survey added the channel-based researcher-imposed measurement based on three items. Each item inquired about the frequency of use of a particular channel on a five-point scale: a) alternative websites, b) content on social media or video platforms, and c) alternative channels in messaging apps. The survey employed a list-frequency technique, which involved providing examples of alternative media channels that are popular in the three principal linguistic regions of Switzerland (i.e., the German-, French-, and Italian-speaking areas) (Vogler et al., 2021). The participants were asked how often they encountered information on science and research across these channels on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently).

Hence, we are able to identify two groups within the data: First, individuals who reported generally using alternative media but did not indicate using any of the channels classified as alternative media from a scientific perspective when asked about specific examples. These individuals have a deviating understanding from the researcher-imposed measurement. Second, individuals who reported generally using alternative media and confirmed this usage when asked about channel-specific examples. We refer to these individuals as having a congruent understanding with the researcher-imposed measurement.

The two groups differ considerably in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, media use, and science-related attitudes. A paired-sample t-test reveals that individuals with a deviating understanding—those not fully captured by the researcher-imposed measurement—have significantly greater trust in science, higher scientific literacy, and lower levels of science-related populism (see Table 12.2). Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, the researcher-imposed measurement tends to overlook alternative media users who are more likely to be male, older, and politically left-leaning. This gives the overall impression that researcher-imposed measurements tend to focus more on right-leaning alternative media,

Table 12.2 Comparison of means between users with a deviating understanding from and a congruent understanding with researcher-imposed measurement of alternative media use

	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Deviating understanding from researcher-imposed measurement</i>	<i>Congruent understanding with researcher-imposed measurement</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Science-related attitudes	Scientific literacy	$M = 3.26; SD = 0.902$	$M = 3.01; SD = 0.95$	-3.69	777	<0.001
	Trust in science	$M = 3.83; SD = 0.764$	$M = 3.71; SD = 0.77$	-2.08	777	0.038
	Science-related populism	$M = 1.65; SD = 1.13$	$M = 2.15; SD = 1.05$	-3.30	777	<0.001
	Positivist attitudes towards science	$M = 3.10; SD = 0.67$	$M = 3.02; SD = 0.64$	-1.67	777	0.095
	Trust in science coverage of legacy media	$M = 3.01; SD = 0.945$	$M = 2.88; SD = 1.06$	-1.83	771	0.067
	TV	$M = 3.10; SD = 1.08$	$M = 3.22; SD = 1.18$	1.44	775	0.572
Media use to access information about science and research	Radio	$M = 2.45; SD = 1.13$	$M = 2.74; SD = 1.23$	3.33	775	< 0.001
	Printed newspaper	$M = 2.92; SD = 1.24$	$M = 2.90; SD = 1.23$	-0.13	773	0.901
	Science magazines	$M = 1.78; SD = 1.11$	$M = 2.27; SD = 1.34$	5.41	769	< 0.001
	News websites/apps	$M = 2.99; SD = 1.16$	$M = 3.33; SD = 1.16$	3.79	739	< 0.001
	On demand TV/radio	$M = 2.32; SD = 1.13$	$M = 2.67; SD = 1.12$	4.08	736	< 0.001
	Social media as news source	$M = 1.85; SD = 1.10$	$M = 2.54; SD = 1.29$	7.80	740	< 0.001

(continued)

Table 12.2 (continued)

	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Deviating understanding from researcher- imposed measurement</i>	<i>Congruent understanding with researcher- imposed measurement</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Sociodemographics	Gender	Female: 52.0%	Female: 41.3%	-2.57	777	0.010
	Age	$M = 51.0$; $SD = 14.6$	$M = 43.2$; $SD = 17.2$	-6.70	777	< 0.001
	Education	Post-secondary education: 59.2%	Post-secondary education: 56.2%	-1.32	774	0.186
	Political orientation	$M = 3.70$; $SD = 1.37$	$M = 3.99$; $SD = 1.37$	2.96	719	0.003

while respondents have a broader understanding of alternative media. Moreover, individuals with a congruent understanding of alternative media according to researcher-imposed measurements generally exhibit higher media use across both traditional media and social media as news sources.

Following the question about the frequency of alternative media usage, respondents were given the opportunity to specify in an open-ended field which alternative media they use beyond those suggested by the researchers, by asking “Which alternative sources are the most important to you personally when it comes to science and research?”. There were 147 answers from people with a congruent understanding of alternative media and 213 answers from people with a deviating understanding. For the classification, we examine multiple factors including how outlets present themselves, conduct comprehensive evaluations of their main web pages, and incorporate findings from existing research about these media sources (see Heft et al., 2021; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019 for a similar approach). Unsurprisingly, individuals with a congruent understanding were far more likely to name outlets typically classified as alternative media within academic discourse, such as *Transition News*, *RT*, or *Daniele Ganzer*. By contrast, respondents with a divergent understanding identified fewer sources that would fit this definition, though a few examples, such as *Alpenparlament.ch*, were mentioned. However, the majority of responses

from both groups did not align with the scientific definition of alternative media.

Inductive analysis revealed that the named sources could be grouped into distinct categories. Many respondents referred to sources that lacked a direct connection to scientific content, including specialized knowledge outlets oriented toward specific professional or consumer interests, crowd-sourced platforms like Wikipedia, social media channels such as TikTok or Instagram, and traditional news media like television, radio, and print journalism. Others referred to sources more closely linked to science, such as institutional research communication formats, including scientific papers, newsletters, or websites, as well as multimedia science magazines or journalistic formats focusing on science-related topics, such as *National Geographic*. Beyond these media channels, some respondents emphasized the role of personal networks, naming acquaintances, colleagues, or scientists as trusted sources of information, while others pointed to physical spaces, such as libraries, conferences, or colloquia, as valuable contexts for engaging with scientific knowledge.

Hence, we observe a broad spectrum of sources, ranging from non-scientific and crowd-sourced platforms to academic and multimedia outlets, as well as interpersonal communication and science communication formats, reflecting the diverse ways individuals access information on science and research and referring to as alternative media.

CONCLUSION

The methodological challenges of measuring alternative media use extend far beyond technical questions of survey design, raising broader epistemological questions about how we conceptualize socially contested phenomena when researcher and user definitions diverge substantially (Klawier et al., 2023; Rauch, 2023).

When researchers employ different measurements with different underlying approaches, they risk generating fundamentally incompatible findings about alternative media use. Inconsistent measurements prevent the accumulation of reliable knowledge and can lead to policy responses that either overestimate or underestimate the scope of alternative media use. When academic measurements systematically overlook certain user populations—as our data suggests with older, left-leaning users who define alternative media more broadly—research risks reinforcing rather than illuminating blind spots in public discourse (Steppat et al., 2023).

The measurement challenges documented here also reflect a deeper conceptual problem: alternative media, in positioning themselves vis-a-vis other, ‘mainstream’ media, exist in a relational space that is inherently unstable and context-dependent (Holt et al., 2019). Unlike measuring more established phenomena such as trust (Rousseau et al., 1998), alternative media measurement requires researchers to navigate shifting definitions that vary across time, place, and social position (Mayerhöffer, 2021).

This definitional fluidity creates a dilemma when measuring alternative media use: Researcher-imposed definitions risk missing how people actually use and experience alternative media in their everyday lives, while user-oriented definitions risk becoming so conceptually elastic that meaningful comparison becomes impossible (Klawier et al., 2023). Neither approach fully captures the phenomenon.

If the goal is to conduct comparative research and quantify alternative media use, then based on our findings, we would generally recommend that survey-based measurements of alternative media use should employ channel-based approaches with researcher-imposed preselection to ensure consistent understanding of ‘alternativeness’ across respondents and alignment with scholarly definitions (Klawier, 2024). While open-ended measurements best capture subjectively perceived alternative media use and thus ‘real definition’ of users themselves, they prevent meaningful comparisons between respondents due to widely varying individual definitions of alternative media (Rauch, 2015; Steppat et al., 2023). Additionally, channel-based approaches should incorporate a broader range of flagship alternative media outlets to capture the field’s diversity effectively (Lievrouw, 2023).

Future research should investigate whether the use of these flagship outlets correlates with the consumption of more niche formats to further validate this approach. At the same time, our findings underscore that measurements of alternative media use are highly context-dependent. As Steppat et al. (2023) note, media fragmentation and polarization significantly influence measurement effectiveness. In highly fragmented systems, channel-based approaches may lose precision; in polarized environments, user-oriented measures may mistakenly categorize mainstream outlets as alternative due to ideological biases rather than structural criteria.

Against this backdrop, we argue that the search for a single ‘correct’ measurement may be misguided. Rather than seeking one perfect approach, the field could benefit from embracing methodological pluralism and mixed measurements—paired with greater transparency regarding

measurement choices and their implications. Researchers should explicitly justify their measurement choices in relation to their research questions, acknowledging what user populations or behaviours are potentially missed by chosen approaches. Each measurement strategy entails specific trade-offs that should be made visible rather than concealed.

The measurement challenges identified here reflect broader difficulties in studying contested social phenomena such as populism, fake news, or media bias—concepts that carry different meanings for researchers, users, and political actors (Eveland et al., 2009).

We therefore recommend that future studies systematically employ both researcher-imposed and user-oriented measurements to understand different aspects of alternative media use. Longitudinal studies could track how measurement approaches perform over time as media landscapes evolve, while systematic comparison across different national contexts could illuminate which challenges are universal and which are context-specific.

Overall, the goal should not be to eliminate measurement challenges but to make them visible, justified, and appropriate to specific research contexts (Cardenal et al., 2022). Only through such methodological reflexivity can the field develop reliable knowledge about alternative media use that serves both scientific understanding and democratic discourse.

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Accessing and Assessing the Content of Alternative Media

Philipp Müller

INTRODUCTION

Central to understanding alternative media is studying the content they publish: What topics do they cover, what sources do they give voice to, what ideological agendas do they advocate, etc. The societal impact of such outlets can only be understood through the messages they distribute (see also Chap. 2). Documenting message content is key to investigating and understanding potential effects of alternative media exposure on the cognitions, emotions, and behaviours of their audience. Researchers wishing to explore such matters are confronted with a multitude of potential avenues for analysis, but also a number of practical methodological issues. One of the biggest challenges certainly resides in gaining access to alternative media's content. Therefore, this chapter commences by reviewing different strategies of obtaining analysis corpora of alternative media content.

Once the data is collected, researchers must decide between various content features that can be analysed and different methodological approaches to conduct such analyses. These different avenues for assessing

P. Müller (✉)

Institute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim,
Mannheim, Germany

e-mail: p.mueller@uni-mannheim.de

the content of alternative media are the second focus of this chapter. As with other areas of media content analysis, the design decisions which have to be made during the study of alternative media content depend on the epistemic goals of each research project. Typically, scholars do not investigate media content as an end in itself, but rather, they intend to extrapolate the observed content patterns to (1) the analysed messages' production circumstances ("diagnostic approach") or (2) their likely uses and effects among the audience ("prognostic approach", Maurer & Reinemann, 2006, p. 13).

These two inferential goals of media content analysis are also often underlying the assessment of alternative media content. Researchers studying alternative media content are, for instance, interested in these outlets' impact during election periods (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2020, prognostic approach)—or they try to uncover their producers' strategies and agendas via content analysis (e.g., McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023, diagnostic approach). These different research aims lead to specific design decisions and have to be kept in mind when reviewing the various options for accessing and assessing the content of alternative media.

ACCESS TO ALTERNATIVE MEDIA CONTENT

One of the first steps of any media content analysis is the construction of an analysis corpus. That is, researchers have to collect the content units to be analysed and store them. Before the advent of digital databases and analysis methods, sampling units (e.g., editions of a television newscast or newspaper) were typically collected manually and, then a corpus consisting of a limited number of units of analysis (e.g., articles or TV news clips) had to be selected from this collection (Krippendorff, 2013, pp. 112–125). In the digital era, sampling is often less of a concern to content analysts as it has become much easier to analyse large corpora of text, sound, or video material using automated methods (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

Nonetheless, accessing the content of alternative media is still not completely straightforward. Whereas legacy news media content is often stored in commercial databases such as *LexisNexis*, or *Factiva* and can be obtained from there, alternative media are non-institutionalized elements of a media system (Holt et al., 2019) and are, therefore, typically not included in said databases. Alternative media researchers have come up with a number of different strategies to address this issue. For qualitative analyses of alternative media (e.g., Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Frischlich et al., 2020;

Mayerhöffer, 2021), the process continues to primarily revolve around questions of adequate sampling: Which alternative media outlets and which articles published within these outlets are of theoretical significance to achieve the goals of the study? Such decisions have to be made in a manual inspection and selection process that only members of the research team with vast knowledge about the study's background are able to conduct (Mayring, 2021, pp. 125–136).

For quantitative studies, a similar manual approach would be to a-priori define specific outlets of interest to a research project and manually store all articles, posts, or videos that are being published by these outlets' front pages, specified sections of their websites, or all articles shared by the outlets on their social media accounts within a specific time frame. Some quantitative content analyses of alternative media indeed explicitly state that they, at least partially, proceeded in such a way when obtaining their analysis corpus (see, e.g., Brems, 2023b; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023). Other studies do not make this explicit, but it can be expected that they followed this path when no other access strategy is explicated. However, the disadvantage of this procedure should be obvious. It is very labour- and time-intensive. Furthermore, a manual approach always carries the risk of deviation from the specified procedure due to human error—which could induce systematic bias in the analysis corpus.

Luckily, the data collection process can be automated, at least for content published on websites. This is typically being done using web scraping (van Atteveldt et al., 2021a, pp. 219–227), a technique by which researchers employ an automated programming script which sends a query to a website in order to retrieve the content behind a specific URL and then parses this content onto a database on the researchers' server within which it is then stored (see also Chap. 20 in this volume). That way, large amounts of website content can be automatically obtained. Typically, this is limited to the textual content of websites which is included in the sites' html source code. However, web scraping can also be used to download and store image files which are used on a website or to record the full visual appearance of any website. Another limitation might arise from copyright. While it is typically no copyright infringement to capture and store publicly available data from websites for research purposes, archiving such data after the conclusion of a research project (or even making them accessible to other researchers) may involve more legal pitfalls, depending on national regulations. Researchers pursuing such a project should always

seek advice from their respective institution's legal department or consult copyright specialists.

Web scraping requires a list of full URLs of all articles to be retrieved, not just the domains (such as [breitbart.com](https://www.breitbart.com)). There are three strategies to generate such lists. First, some studies rely on the alternative news websites' RSS feeds (e.g., Klawier et al., 2022; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). An RSS feed (abb. For Really Simple Syndication) provides a list of the most recent contents published on a website including their full URL, title, and time stamp of publication in a standardized XML format, which can be read using an RSS reader software script. Most websites that regularly publish news content, including most alternative media websites, offer such a solution. This enables alternative media researchers to set up a script that repeatedly reads the RSS feed data of alternative media websites and then passes on the URLs of all newly published articles to the web scraping script. Second, one can use link extraction (sometimes also referred to as web crawling) to retrieve all internal URLs linked to within a website. This can be achieved, for instance, by using the 'minet' python package (Plique et al., 2025). As compared to RSS feeds, link extraction offers an approach that may allow access also to older pages. Third, some alternative media researchers have also relied on the services of *Media Cloud*, an open-source, non-profit service for media analysis (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2020; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Wong & Trilling, 2023). It offers a large database of legacy and alternative media outlets from across the globe, including URLs of all their published news stories, obtained via RSS feeds for most of the outlets. If the research units of interest are not alternative media's websites but their social media accounts, another option to access content data can be via APIs (Application Programming Interfaces, see also Chap. 14 in this volume). These are formally defined protocols that specify how software components can interact and communicate (van Atteveldt et al., 2021a, pp. 213–218). Some alternative media content analyses explicitly interested in outlets' social media activities made use of this option to access content data (e.g., Boberg et al., 2020). However, in recent years almost all commercial social media platforms have closed down API access (Bruns, 2022). This current situation only leaves researchers with the option to scrape the publicly accessible profile pages of alternative media on the platforms of interest, if they want to engage in analyses of alternative media's social media content. This means that alternative media content which is posted to platforms not by the

alternative outlets themselves but by other users (see, Mayerhöffer et al., 2024) might go unnoticed.

Irrespective of the way in which digital alternative media content has been obtained, the data will have to be cleaned before conducting analyses. The more automated steps were involved in accessing the data, the more likely it is that the data contain bulk items (such as event announcements, live tickers, or promotion texts for online shops), duplicates, or other forms of unmeaningful noise which have to be removed from the analysis corpus. Moreover, it can also be necessary to select specific content units (e.g., only those mentioning a specific set of keywords) before analysis. Another issue in working with digital content data is the greater risk of holes in the analysis corpus. Web scraping only works for accessible content. Therefore, paywalled articles can typically not be scraped. As most alternative media outlets do not work with paywalls, this problem is bigger when scraping legacy media content.

Additionally, content on websites or social media profiles may be de-published after a certain amount of time. Therefore, in order to assure that all published messages are being captured, timing is crucial. Research teams may have to observe typical patterns of de-publication of the outlets they want to study in order to determine the perfect interval for manually or automatically retrieving newly published content. Accessing data with a longer time delay (for instance, scraping items which have been published in previous years) is generally not recommendable in light of this issue. The bigger the time delay between publication and data collection, the more likely it is that parts of the desired analysis corpus have been de-published meanwhile, which would arguably induce systematic bias in an analysis corpus.

These issues notwithstanding, digital information environments offer a vast array of options for accessing analysis data for alternative media content analyses. However, obtaining this data requires some skills in working with digital data and the availability of some basic level of computing infrastructure, at least as long the goal is to obtain a large analysis corpus that can be used for quantitative analysis.

AVENUES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA CONTENT

Assessing the content of alternative media is, of course, the main purpose of constructing an analysis corpus using one of the strategies described in the previous section. Both, the corpus creation as well as the analysis strategy followed should be defined by the substantial research interest, the question that a research team hopes to answer. Various categories of interest can become the target of alternative media content analyses. Many of these will be described in this section. Before that, however, attention will be given to the different methodological approaches that can be applied in media content analysis.

Methodological Approaches

As already mentioned, one can generally distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research designs. In qualitative media content analysis, “the process of assignment of categories to text passages [is conceptualized] as a qualitative-interpretive act” (Mayring, 2021, p. 26). This allows qualitative analyses to take a more in-depth look into the coded materials, trying to capture also implicit meanings of texts or images which are not as easily accessible to quantitative analyses which are used to assess features of large text corpora in a standardized way (Krippendorff, 2013, pp. 88–90). Moreover, qualitative analyses are better suited to work inductively with the materials which means that categories of interest can be inferred directly from the analyzed content during the analysis process (while quantitative studies have to do so before commencement of the actual analysis). This makes qualitative content analysis ideal for research endeavours whose epistemic goals are more explorative. Their clear strength resides in the identification of previously unknown stylistic or argumentative patterns within media content. As studying alternative media is still a relatively novel field within media and communication research, many of their content features do indeed have to be explored before they can be generalized. This has led many alternative media scholars to employ qualitative content analysis (e.g. Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Frischlich et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2025; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Nygaard, 2019; Brems, 2023a).

Quantitative designs are necessarily more reductive. Their aim is to arrive at a comprehensive, generalizing picture of the frequencies with

which different content patterns are represented within their objects of study. For many decades this has mostly been achieved using human coding (Krippendorff, 2013). Consequently, there is also a plethora of alternative media studies which performed quantitative analyses with human coders (Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; Cushion et al., 2021; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025; Klawier et al., 2022; Staender et al., 2024; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Heft et al., 2024). Beyond that, automated text analysis methods have been on the rise since over a decade (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013) and are continuously evolving. When applying such computational methods, researchers use computer algorithms to quantify the occurrence of features within media content and, thus, enable the analysis of seemingly endless amounts of data (for an overview, see, van Atteveldt et al., 2021a). This is also their main difference compared to traditional quantitative analysis methods: For larger numbers of units to be analyzed, the workload hardly increases (although the required computing power does), making it very easy to analyse all texts of interest instead of drawing samples. This has consequences for subsequent statistical analyses. While traditional quantitative studies typically rely on inferential statistics to draw conclusions from samples to populations of media coverage, this data analysis step can oftentimes be omitted in the computational methods framework.

In this field one can generally distinguish dictionary-based approaches which detect the occurrence of a pre-defined list of words within texts (as used, e.g., by Boberg et al., 2020), fully-automated clustering of texts (as employed by Boberg et al., 2020; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025; Henriksen et al., 2024; Kaiser et al., 2020; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022) which is a text-analytical variant of unsupervised machine learning (ML), as well as supervised ML. The latter still requires a lot of human coding to generate data from which an algorithm can learn to detect the target content patterns (training data) and to which its performance can be compared (test data). Validation studies indicate that quantitative media content analysis typically achieves higher accuracy rates, the more human coding is involved. Accordingly, fully manually coded analyses outperform supervised ML approaches, which, however, are superior to (unsupervised) dictionary-based approaches in concurring with a researcher-defined ‘gold standard’ coding solution (see, e.g., van Atteveldt et al., 2021b).

Recent methodological innovations promise to reduce the amount of manually coded data required while increasing the quality of analysis results simultaneously (for an overview, see, Stolwijk et al., 2025). They

are based on pre-trained language models (LMs) such as *BERT* or *GPT* which can be used for the quantitative coding of written text with only minor adjustments extracted from human-coded data (few-shot classification) or even without giving the models any additional manually coded data (zero-shot classification). Alternative media research, however, has yet to exploit the massive potential that these methodological innovations come along with. Even the more traditional supervised machine learning approaches have not been widely used in this research area thus far. Without a doubt, this will change soon.

Substantive Categories of Interest

One of the content features which received most scholarly attention in the past is alternative media's relationship to legacy media (see also Chap. 4). Various studies have explored how alternative media explicitly address and criticize what they call 'mainstream media', but also the extent to which they cite traditional journalistic outlets or other alternative media as sources or even set hyperlinks to their websites (Atton & Wickenden, 2005; Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Frischlich et al., 2020; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). The ideational core of alternative media is also expressed in their political-ideological leaning. While early research on alternative media stressed them as outlets of a progressive, pro-democratic counterpublic (see, e.g., Atton, 2002; Harcup, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2014), the last two decades witnessed a shift in focus towards right-wing populist or far-right alternative media (see, e.g., Atton, 2006; Kaiser et al., 2020; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). As these quite contradictory political camps can be associated with alternative media, it is of utmost importance to investigate specific outlets' political partisanship with content analyses.

Scholars have previously used different indicators to document alternative media outlets' political leaning. One apparent option is to analyze the amount of coverage that different political actors receive from an outlet (assessed by, e.g., Boberg et al., 2020; Brems, 2023b; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023) and the valence with which they are being evaluated (see, e.g., Heft et al., 2024). While the first half of this task (determining which actors are being referenced) is quite straightforward and can easily be achieved using manual or automated quantitative approaches, the latter half of it can be challenging. To assess the sentiment or evaluation an actor receives from a text can require some level of

interpretation which makes it more difficult to arrive at reliable, reproducible results.

Consequently, studies have complemented the investigation of actor appearances in alternative media with that of the topics covered in these outlets (Areal et al., 2025; Boberg et al., 2020; Brems, 2023b; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025; Kaiser et al., 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). The idea behind this is that some article topics can be clearly linked to a specific political agenda and, thus, their inflated coverage within an alternative medium can be interpreted as an indicator of said outlets' political affiliation. Content analyses of alternative media's topic repertoire's have been used to investigate their proximity to political ideologies and foreign state actors (Henriksen et al., 2024; Kaiser et al., 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022), their stance on political issues such as the Covid pandemic or climate change (Areal et al., 2025; Boberg et al., 2020), or they have been used to document these outlets' 'alternativeness' in comparison to legacy news media (Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025).

Most of these studies employed an automated analysis strategy, namely fully-automated clustering, to assign topics to the outlets' coverage. This analysis method, also called topic modelling, decomposes texts into so called bags-of-words and then uses a clustering algorithm to group those texts which feature similar words (see also Chap. 20 in this volume). The resulting picture of latent clusters of texts is typically being interpreted as distinguishing between texts featuring different topics. Different algorithms are available for this task, with latent dirichlet allocation (Maier et al., 2018) and the somewhat more recent and also more adequate structural topic modelling (Roberts et al., 2019) being used most prominently. Using topical clustering is very popular among content analytical researchers as the technique produces meaningful results with relatively little effort. Using embedding-based packages such as 'Top2Vec' (Angelov, 2020) or the LM-driven 'BERTopic' (Grootendorst, 2022) promises to further increase the validity of findings as these approaches are able to consider the context in which words appear within the clustered texts. However, one should not be misled by the process being described as fully-automated. To arrive at truly meaningful findings, researchers have to engage in an in-depth qualitative analysis of the topic clusters resulting from an automated analysis. This requires a close reading of articles representative for each of the identified topics (Maier et al., 2018).

Topic modelling is also sometimes misinterpreted as being able to indicate the frames that are being used in articles. Yet, this is a flawed assumption (Chan et al., 2024). Following Robert Entman (1993, p. 52), framing is typically understood as the “promot[ion of] a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” in a news text. This complex, multi-perspectival assessment of a topic is not necessarily reflected in a fully automated clustering of news reports. Different texts pertaining to the same topic may use very different frames to describe it. Frame analysis is, therefore, still mostly conducted using manual coding. However, it can also be realized using supervised ML or few-shot learning with LMs. The demanding manual coding process that is required for each of these methods may explain why fewer content analyses of alternative media have actually tackled the investigation of applied frames. One exemption is a study by Klawier et al. (2022) who have assessed the frame repertoires of different alternative media outlets and interpret these as indicative for the outlets’ self-positioning in relation to legacy media. As the use of frames is a wide field, there is still a lot of potential for future alternative media research in this respect.

Contrary to that, a perspective increasingly covered by empirical research is the extent to which alternative media distribute populist messages (Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022), conspiracy narratives (Boberg et al., 2020; Linders et al., 2025; Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024) or disinformation (Boberg et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2025; Hameleers & Yekta, 2023; Staender et al., 2024). Particularly the latter can be quite challenging because classifying a message as disinformation requires investigating and documenting the truthfulness of its claims (Wardle, 2018). In quantitative analyses, it is hardly possible to achieve this for all the various messages under study. As a workaround, studies have focused on a limited set of popular disinformation and have developed lists of typical words for each of these individual cases (Boberg et al., 2020)—or they have used stylistic markers which can only be interpreted as a loose approximation of disinformation rather than an actual investigation of it (Staender et al., 2024). As there is still no convincing quantitative strategy for the detection of disinformation on the horizon, qualitative content analyses are more promising in this sub-field of alternative media content research (such as Hameleers, 2025; Hameleers & Yekta, 2023).

Longitudinal and Comparative Research Designs

Media content analyses typically assess their categories of interest for multiple outlets. The substantial research interest is, then, of a comparative nature (Rössler, 2012). Studies try to carve out differences between the outlets under investigation concerning the dimensions of interest. In alternative media research, the most obvious perspective is to compare the content of alternative and legacy media (see, e.g., Brems, 2023b; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2025; Hameleers & Yekta, 2023; Klawier et al., 2022; Linders et al., 2025). But there are also studies which predominantly compare different alternative media outlets (see, e.g., Kaiser et al., 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). A perspective of comparison that is very common in media content analysis generally but still somewhat rare with regards to alternative media, is cross-national comparison (see, e.g., Heft et al., 2024; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Nygaard, 2019; Staender et al., 2024). In this respect, the field still has a lot of potential for further development.

Comparisons necessarily come along with a specific challenge: The categories of interest as well as their operationalization have to be adequate for all entities under investigation. For research comparing alternative and legacy media, this means that dimensions of description will have to be developed that either apply to both types of media content, or that it has to be accepted that specific categories will only be found for one specific type of outlets in the analysis corpus. This can be challenging as alternative media outlets do not necessarily follow conventional journalistic formats and styles. There can thus be a lot of variations in how sources are quoted, issues are framed, valence is being expressed etc. between alternative and legacy media. Yet, if these outlets are to be compared within a single study, the coding categories will have to be able to capture all of these variations.

When developing coding categories and instructions for quantitative content analysis it is always commendable to combine deductive and inductive considerations. Categories of interest and instructions for human coders should be grounded in overarching conceptual considerations on the categories of interest. At the same time, they should be closely linked to the material that is to be coded in the study. Researchers should always engage in a qualitative, in-depth reading of exemplary units of analysis, check whether coding categories and instructions enable them to code the substantial content of these units in a complete list of clearly

distinguishable categories, and extract text examples from these materials and add them to the coding instructions to make them more self-explanatory.

Thus, for conducting comparative analyses of alternative and legacy media, it is crucial to ensure that all types of media outlets that are supposed to be covered in the study are considered during this process. If a specific category or feature appears to be relevant only for a limited set of outlets in the sample, it should be operationalised nonetheless in order to avoid blind spots in the analysis. If specific meanings are expressed in different ways in legacy and alternative media, but these expressions have to be considered functional equivalents from a conceptual point of view, the codebook should account for this and allow for all variants that are present in the materials to be coded. For computational analyses, this logic also needs to be considered when generating training data or zero-shot coding prompts. For comparing alternative media from different ideological or national backgrounds, it is also crucial to consider all of the different outlets under study when generating categories of interest.

This also applies to comparisons over time. Longitudinal research designs are used to describe how the content within a specific outlet or a set of outlets has changed over longer periods. They can also be used to assess where within a media system specific observed changes occurred initially in order to determine its leading publications. In alternative media research, longitudinal designs are yet scarce (but see Cushion et al., 2021; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023). However, since this sector of the media system has flourished in the past decade, we can expect to see more such studies in the future.

CONCLUSION

The content of alternative media has been a flourishing field of research in recent years. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that a lot of questions have yet to be addressed. Particularly, we are in need of more longitudinal and internationally comparative studies. Concerning the substantial categories of interest, there is still a lot of potential in further integrating the notion of framing in alternative media research. Moreover, while there is plenty of research on how alternative media refer to and deal with legacy media and various political actors, less is known about their reporting of substantial societal and policy issues, particularly concerning the tonalities, substantial arguments, and rhetoric of issue debates within alternative media. Beyond

that, also agenda-setting dynamics, i.e. how attention to issues travels between political actors, legacy, and alternative media.

When we consider the two inferential goals of media content analysis discussed at the beginning of this article (diagnostic and prognostic approaches), a lot of potential also resides in combining content analysis data with other data sources. Linkage analyses that use tracking data of users' website visits (see Chap. 14) in combination with an assessment of the content those users read on alternative media websites are key for precisely assessing the uses and effects of specific content (e.g., Areal et al., 2025). Combinations of content analyses with qualitative surveys of alternative media producers (such as Boler, 2015; Elswah & Howard, 2020) could help to unveil the production circumstances and strategic stipulations behind alternative media.

The recent advent of LMs as a new means to conduct automated media content analyses will certainly help to further exploit previously inaccessible analysis options for alternative media content in the very near future. With this in mind, it should become apparent that studying the content of alternative media, while already being a flourishing field of research, still has a lot of potential to unlock.

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Analysing Alternative Media with Digital Trace Data

Jakob Bæk Kristensen and Ernesto de León

INTRODUCTION

Since the ‘computational turn’ in media and communication studies digital trace data have become a popular means of studying news consumption and sharing online. Most digital technologies are designed to log and store every action taken by their users. Repurposing the digital ‘breadcrumbs’ that users leave behind on online platforms offers a behavioural lens on social and communicative processes. Digital trace data have become invaluable for studying how news curation and information sharing influence opinion formation in public communication spaces (Stieglitz et al., 2018). According to Bruns (2023), two common perspectives have emerged: one focuses on the personal public, which entails tracing media engagement and/or exposure surrounding a single individual; the other considers interest publics—or public spherules—and typically seeks to

J. B. Kristensen (✉)

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark
e-mail: jakobbk@ruc.dk

E. de León

Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, Netherlands

map large-scale sharing and engagement with media content around an issue or a collection of public actors. This chapter follows the distinction laid out by these two perspectives on the digital consumption and sharing of (alternative) news content. We posit that what we term individual-level data—obtained through web tracking and data donations—can reveal people’s personal publics, that is, all the news and information interfaces that potentially influence a single individual. Conversely, what we term aggregate-level data—obtained from platform APIs and web scraping—can be used to map large-scale information-sharing landscapes and to locate alternative news within them. The chapter presents the technical fundamentals of collecting aggregate- and individual-level data and demonstrates their use through examples from state-of-the-art alternative news research. Finally, we describe in detail how combining the two perspectives can open new avenues for understanding the role of alternative media in large and complex digital information landscapes.

AGGREGATE LEVEL DATA - PLATFORM APIs AND WEB SCRAPING

Aggregate-level data refers to digital traces sourced from one or more platforms rather than from a sample of individual users. Data harvested from online platforms—whether social media, or other websites—can be rich and highly granular, depending on the level of access the platform allows at a given time. Researchers can often retrieve all public posts that contain a specific keyword or hashtag or that share a particular article (Rogers, 2025). However, because these data are determined by aggregate user behaviour on a specific platform, they rarely allow researchers to trace what a single user does over time or across multiple platforms. For instance, it may be possible to learn how many users in total liked or commented on a shared alternative news article, but not what other content those same users previously liked or what other websites they may have visited. At a technical level, it is common to distinguish between platform APIs and web scraping. The former rely on an interface offered by a platform—such as a social media site—through which data can be downloaded in a structured format. Web scraping, by contrast, entails programming a bot to open a browser, systematically visit the relevant parts of a platform, and record specified data points (e.g., text content, date and time of a post, and the number of user interactions; see also Chaps. 13 and 20 in

this volume). Both techniques are typically implemented either with ready-made tools created for common collection tasks or with custom code written in R or Python.

Aggregate-level data acquired via platform APIs (application programming interfaces) allow researchers to download material directly from a platform's databases. Until recently, Facebook and Twitter (now X) enabled researchers to search for any news articles posted on a public page, group, or profile—or to download all posts from those public entities. Such interfaces made it possible to examine how many likes and comments alternative media organizations received on their pages. One study, for example, found that alternative and hyperpartisan media outlets in Norway generally obtained higher engagement on their social media pages than national and regional outlets (Larsson, 2019). APIs with search endpoints also allow researchers to track alternative news articles posted by different public actors, thus making it feasible to study curators of alternative news on a large scale. Mayerhöffer et al. (2024) explored the influence of such curators across multiple platforms by collecting every post that linked to Danish or Swedish alternative news sites. They showed that most social media engagement was generated not by the outlets' own social media pages but by a heterogeneous set of curators such as public Facebook groups and social media influencers.

Other studies have leveraged the efficiency of platform APIs to situate alternative media within broader information ecosystems. Research indicates that social media curators typically share material from a wide range of sources, meaning that alternative news articles are rarely shared in isolation (e.g., Angus et al., 2023; González-Bailón et al., 2022). Kristensen et al. (2023) identified every public profile that across four countries and eight platforms had shared at least one link to an alternative news outlet and then collected three years of posts from those profiles. This produced a cross-platform alternative news environment that included links to mainstream news, blogs, YouTube videos, conspiracy sites, and more. Similar approaches have been used by Henriksen et al. (2024) to assess Russian state-affiliated media penetration in Northern Europe and by Mayerhöffer et al. (2024) to compare the mainstream orientation of alternative news environments in countries with differing stances towards fringe parties.

Digital trace data do not need to come from social media sites; they can also be collected from news sites and other webpages. Harvesting RSS feeds in combination with web scraping has long been popular for studying alternative news and hyperlinking practices (see also Chap. 13 in this

volume). Designed to let users syndicate content manually rather than rely on social media algorithms, RSS lets researchers gather large numbers of article URLs, which can then be scraped for text or images. Using Media Cloud—an online database of articles collected via RSS—Heft et al. (2021) mapped hyperlinking among alternative news outlets in Europe and the United States, finding that countries with less developed ecosystems linked more heavily to foreign sources, thereby creating a transnational network. Similarly, Horne et al. (2019) collected RSS feeds from a mix of mainstream and alternative U.S. outlets and showed that both sets formed highly homogeneous information-sharing communities through their hyperlinking practices.

The primary challenge for aggregate-level digital-trace data is access. APIs differ sharply in what they expose, complicating cross-platform work. V Kontakte, for instance, lets researchers search all posts containing a keyword; Facebook offers a similar endpoint but caps the results once they exceed 2000, while Telegram provides no keyword search at all. Access also changes rapidly: what Facebook's API allowed in 2015 is vastly different from what it allows in 2025 (see Bruns, 2022). This volatility hampers replicability and forces scholars to spend time rewriting code and learning new tools as old ones become obsolete. Because digital trace data are transactional—generated for platform functionality, not research—scholars must simply 'make do' with what is available at a given moment (Leeftink & Angus, 2023). For example, demographic information on users who like or comment on alternative news posts would greatly enhance many studies, yet no platform currently provides such data. The final section of this chapter offers a case study illustrating how to work around these access constraints when analyzing the consumption and sharing of alternative news online.

The prospects for digital trace data are hard to predict because data access and the platform-API landscape are constantly changing. At the time of writing, Telegram and TikTok were the only larger social media platforms that still provided interfaces that allow researchers to download data systematically, although they are poorly maintained (e.g., Pearson et al., 2025). Additionally, Meta has recently launched a limited-access repository for which scholars can apply for access to Facebook and Instagram, though it is more restrictive than previous APIs. Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, which revealed how marketers used personal data from millions of users by taking advantage of loopholes in Facebook's public API, platforms and their parent organizations have

grown increasingly wary of granting access and have adopted more restrictive approaches (Bruns, 2021). The prevailing view became that the potential gains from giving access to researchers did not outweigh the risks. At the time of writing, the short-term prospects are somewhat unclear. Three directions might be considered for the future of API-based research: (1) increased reliance on web scraping using both open-source and commercial tools (Bruns, 2021), (2) increased popularity of new decentralized and open-protocol platforms such as Mastodon and Bluesky that have open APIs (Schoch & Chan, 2023; Failla & Rossetti, 2024), and (3) leveraging new legislation such as the EU-wide Digital Services Act to obtain data from platforms through audits (Mimizuka et al., 2025).

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL DATA—WEB TRACKING AND DATA DONATIONS

Platform APIs have always been subject to a high degree of uncertainty in terms of access, but the recent drastic changes have caused web tracking and data donations to become increasingly attractive in the academic community.

Researchers hoping to understand how individuals engage with news have long advocated for the use of behavioural measures of news engagement, as opposed to more traditional survey measures. Before scholars shifted their attention to the online world, Prior made use of television monitors to get a realistic measure of news engagement. The results have since told a cautionary tale: participants routinely overestimate the amount of news they consume (Prior, 2009). Such findings have been replicated throughout the online news sphere (Parry et al., 2021; Scharkow, 2016). The desirability effects are very real here, with Valli et al. (2024) showing that those who are most likely to overestimate their news consumption are those with high political interest. Another likely explanation is recall - participants simply forget what news websites and how many times they have accessed them. We have good reasons to believe desirability and recall biases are enhanced when dealing with alternative media. In terms of desirability effects, past work has shown that readership of alternative media is often socially frowned upon and/or deemed an ideological exercise (see also Chap. 12 in this volume). This means when asked in interviews or surveys, participants might be hesitant to disclose the degree to which they actively follow alternative news, if at all. In terms of recall,

alternative news websites are often not as popular as traditional media offerings. Therefore, participants might have trouble remembering exposure to it. Digital trace methods that uncover individual-level exposure are therefore especially urgent when studying alternative media, as they can help researchers measure exposure to the long-tail of less well-known alternative news sites (Gonzalez-Bailon & Xenos, 2023).

Through web tracking and digital trace ‘data donations’, users of social media and other digital platforms can share records of their digital behaviour voluntarily, which is appealing in terms of transparency, consent, and data quality. The main drawback, in contrast to aggregate-level data collection, is that participants need to be recruited similarly to interviews and surveys, thereby inheriting some of the same complications vis-à-vis recruitment described in Chaps. 11 and 12.

Web tracking works by asking participants to install a tracking software on their device(s), which can then actively log browser data (Adam et al., 2024) or data from a specific platform, such as Facebook (Burgess et al., 2022). Data donation, on the other hand, relies on participants exporting and sharing the data that platforms collect by default (Boeschoten et al., 2020). For example, Google Chrome and other popular web browsers continuously save users’ browsing history, which can be exported as a single file containing structured data about the date and time that specific URLs were accessed by the user. Similar features are available on platforms such as Facebook and TikTok offering rich data on user activity. Because digital trace data donations are a relatively newer data collection method, most work tracking exposure to alternative news has made use of the web tracking approach. Therefore, the remainder of this section focuses on this method, reflecting on some areas of opportunity opened by data donation approaches.

Earliest use of individual-level behavioural data to investigate ‘problematic’ information consumption was within the misinformation research space. Here, studies aiming to capture individual exposure to misinformation often used lists of domains that were labelled as ‘fake news’ (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) or ‘untrustworthy’ sites (Guess et al., 2020), but, open closer inspection, contained news sites that fit the ‘alternative’ label. Since then, studies have begun using web tracking to paint a better picture of explicit exposure to alternative news media. There have been two general approaches to measuring the effects of alternative news exposure in individuals. The first limits the measurement to visits at the domain level, where any visit to a pre-defined list of alternative news sites is counted. In

Germany, Bach et al. (2023) documented the relationship between alternative news and right-wing populist attitudes. Similarly, Müller and Bach (2023) used web tracking across two German elections to quantify the relationship of populist alternative news to voting behaviour, showing strong ties to populist right-wing parties. Stier et al. (2022), focusing on ‘hyperpartisan’ news sites (a news type that intersects with alternative news media (de León, 2025)) and selective exposure patterns, found that visits to this type of alternative news media are correlated to populist attitudes. De León et al. (2024) focused on expanding the lists of alternative media sites, and adding hyperpartisan, alternative, and conspiracy (HAC) media sites into a single construct linked by their anti-establishment-ness. Here, they provided a detailed ‘portrait’ of HAC media users, detailing its relationship to media and political trust, how these users navigate the internet to access this information, and the effects that its consumption had on how individuals viewed the pandemic.

The second approach not only focuses on the domain level, but quantifies access to specific news topics in alternative media. This requires an additional layer of analysis: researchers do not only have to quantify visits to the sites themselves, but also efficiently categorize the topic of the alternative news articles. Using web tracking, Areal et al. (2025) investigated the individual engagement with alternative news coverage of environmental topics. Linking this to panel surveys, they find a relationship between the readership of alternative news on climate topics, and polarization of climate attitudes. Similarly, using web tracking and during the COVID-19 lockdown in Switzerland, de León et al. (2023) measured access to alternative news articles on the topic of COVID-19 to explore how alternative news readership limited the ‘rally-round the flag’ effect during the first wave of the pandemic.

There are, however, important limitations to keep in mind when relying on web tracking data to study engagement with alternative news media. First, most web tracking tools primarily capture desktop or browser-based behaviours, often overlooking activity on mobile devices, despite the fact that many people now consume the majority of their news on smartphones. More critically, web tracking continues to struggle with capturing what happens within social media platforms. Since this method typically only records whether someone visited a site, it cannot reflect the actual content people saw and engaged with while on the platform. For example, a user on Facebook who frequently encounters posts from alternative media accounts would still only appear in the data as having visited

[Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com). As such, a significant portion of engagement with alternative media - especially when it occurs via social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or Telegram - remains invisible in many current datasets. In addition, web tracking studies frequently rely on non-representative samples, often skewed toward more digitally literate or privacy-tolerant users (Gil-Lopez et al., 2023). This sampling bias can complicate generalizations about the broader population. Another often overlooked issue is that exposure to alternative news tends to follow a power-law distribution, where a small number of sites dominate attention. As a result, a single domain might account for the majority of a user's alternative media exposure—something that needs to be made explicit in study designs and reporting.

Given these limitations, scholars should avoid ‘blindly recycling’ pre-defined lists of alternative news websites from one study to the next. Each web tracking sample is unique, with its own context-specific media landscape and consumption habits. Therefore, site lists should be curated with care and tailored to the audience being studied. At the same time, transparency and comparability across studies are crucial. Researchers should be encouraged to openly share the lists of domains they use, as well as metadata indicating how often each site appears in the browsing histories of their participants (de León et al., 2024). This allows for clearer interpretation of findings, shows the relative weight of individual sources, and fosters cumulative knowledge building across the field. While still a relatively young research area, the growing use of digital trace data, both through web tracking and data donations, offers a promising pathway toward a more detailed, behaviourally grounded understanding of how people engage with alternative media in the digital age. Special attention should be given when combining survey data (Stier et al., 2020a, 2020b) and when deciding how to analyze it (Mangold & Stier, 2025).

Digital trace “data donations” have received comparatively less attention as a methodological tool for studying engagement with alternative media, likely because they represent a relatively new and still evolving analytical strategy. Despite their novelty, data donations offer considerable potential to advance this line of research. One of their key advantages is the ability to mitigate desirability effects that can be associated with traditional web tracking. In standard web tracking studies, participants are required to install a plugin or tracking system, which may heighten their awareness of being observed and, in turn, alter their browsing behaviour (Otto et al., 2024). This reactivity can lead to underreporting or

avoidance of visits to controversial or stigmatized websites, including alternative news sources. Data donations, by contrast, typically involve the retroactive sharing of browsing or platform usage data, reducing the likelihood that participants change their behaviour due to the study itself.

In addition to minimizing reactivity, data donations also tend to cover longer time spans. While web tracking studies often rely on compensation schemes that limit participation to relatively short periods, since participants must be paid for every additional day, their data is collected, data donations often span at least one year and sometimes even longer, depending on the platform and the user's history. This extended time frame allows for a more comprehensive understanding of engagement patterns and trends over time. This, however, can also be seen as a downside: web tracking provides greater transparency between researchers and participants, as participants may be more aware of what they are sharing with the researcher.

The limitation with web tracking in terms of capturing exposure to content *within* social media feeds (Ohme et al., 2024) can potentially be alleviated by data donations offering granular, user-level data from within the platforms where much of today's news consumption occurs. As such, embracing data donations more fully could help researchers paint a more accurate and nuanced picture of how people engage with alternative media in the digital ecosystem.

Researching alternative news users generally brings challenges when it comes to recruitment. Potential data donors and survey respondents who consume alternative news tend to be especially sceptical of academic researchers and other parties that represent perceived establishment institutions (Zils et al., 2025). As such, alternative news users are likely to be underrepresented in data-donation and web tracking studies. Enriching individual-level data with aggregate-level data, where this particular recruitment bias is less present, is a potential way forward, especially when including multiple alternative platforms (e.g., Kristensen, 2025). This will be illustrated in the next section.

PROSPECTS FOR DIGITAL TRACE STUDIES - COMBINING DATA PERSPECTIVES AND MEASURING NETWORKED EXPOSURE

The distinct approaches born from individual- and aggregate-level data can provide complementary perspectives on how alternative news is consumed and shared online; they are, however, rarely combined. As

mentioned, individual-level data is particularly useful for studying media diets and exposure to information centred on the individual and their “personal public,” that is, the way the greater public appears to the individual from their perspective. Studies relying on large-scale public collection of data from platform APIs contain less information about individual users and how they have accessed and shared content but instead allow information-sharing networks containing small activity traces from thousands of users to be mapped and explored. Alternative news, as with most other types of content produced primarily for digital channels, is rarely consumed in isolation. Here we argue that the combination of aggregate- and individual-level data can deliver further insights into the role played by alternative news within complex consumption patterns. This section shows how combining these two perspectives allows researchers to study second-order effects of alternative news consumption in greater detail.

Selective exposure to, and active sharing of, news on digital platforms, whether alternative or mainstream, often correlate with political attitudes. Some alternative news outlets are labelled hyperpartisan owing to their biased content (Mayerhöffer, 2021), for example *Breitbart* in the United States or *Weltwoche* in Switzerland (de León et al., 2023). Although many mainstream organizations strive for neutral reporting, certain outlets resonate more with particular constituencies—for instance, *The New York Times* among Democratic voters in the United States. Recent studies suggest, however, that the era in which a single outlet could be linked neatly to one political segment has ended (e.g., Billard, 2022). Instead, digital news curation has aligned news use and political attitudes along far more fine-grained and complex information environments (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017). In a comprehensive study of Twitter and Facebook, Green et al. (2025) showed that many sources, *The New York Times* among them, are shared across the political spectrum, yet the particular stories each side circulates are sharply polarized. Republican partisans, for instance, may share numerous *Times* articles but typically select those that support their stance, often appending critical comments.

Taking the complexity of digital news curation into consideration puts additional emphasis on second-order news consumption and information exposure: What does it signify if someone frequently visits *Breitbart* while also (perhaps incidentally) accessing *New York Times* articles? How does alternative news function when shared alongside mainstream reports or fringe conspiracy content? Identifying such second-order effects is

difficult. A promising path is therefore to combine aggregate- and individual-level perspectives more fully.

Linking aggregate- and individual-level data requires the identification of meaningful overlaps between the two types of data. In our case we wanted to explore the degree to which URLs visited by respondents matched with URLs shared by public accounts on social media. Since the data sources are different, three data preparation steps are necessary. First, URLs need to be extracted from the posts in the case of aggregate-level data and the raw tracking data in the case of individual-level data. Second, URLs need to be resolved since some links might be hidden behind URL shorteners or other types of http redirects. Third, URLs need to be standardised which entails removing tokens and parameters from the specific URL string that are appended due to various tracking and marketing concerns.¹

In principle, a URL is not the only type of content allowing for a combination of individual- and aggregate-level data. It is possible to imagine other standardized tokens such as hashtags, memes or simply keywords which have been used especially in studies relying on aggregate to map the similarity of curation patterns among public accounts on social media (Bruns et al., 2025). However, since many alternative news outlets have their own websites, URLs are a natural starting point when seeking to explore alternative news consumption in the context of the larger information-sharing environment in which it is embedded. Doing so can reveal the overlap between people's personal exposure and the public curation of content across platforms—a phenomenon we call networked exposure (de León et al., 2025).

To estimate networked exposure among alternative news audiences, we conducted a study that merged aggregate- and individual-level data. The first dataset drew on a survey of Swiss and German citizens (N = 864) with accompanying web tracking. After the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe, participants installed a browser plug-in that recorded every unique URL they visited during a two-month period; they were later surveyed about their trust in political and media institutions. We identified all domains classifiable as alternative, hyperpartisan, or conspiracy outlets—collectively, HAC

¹Examples include `?utm=;` `clickon=` which sends information to web analytics software about where the user came from when they clicked on the URL, but does not have any impact on the information that the user is presented with (see Kristensen et al., 2023).

media—and compiled the unique URLs involved. Roughly 250 participants had accessed at least one such URL in the period.

The second dataset comprised posts from public accounts on eight platforms (Facebook, Instagram, X [Twitter], YouTube, Telegram, Reddit, Vkontakte, Gab, and 4chan) that had shared at least one of those HAC-media URLs. Having second-order content in both datasets was crucial: we knew not only which individuals accessed specific HAC articles and which public accounts shared them, but also every other item each party accessed or shared—mainstream news, social media material, and so forth.

By including both perspectives, the aggregate and individual level, the results let us explore which mainstream news are most frequently shared by accounts with a propensity for sharing HAC media (i.e. alternative news). Plot A in Fig. 14.1 depicts the personal publics of two randomly selected individuals in the individual-level web tracking data. Not surprisingly, each network shows a single person at the centre with connections to all online media to which they have been exposed. Plot B presents a network of public social media accounts and the URLs they shared during the study period. Plot C reveals that the two individuals do not share the same networked exposure: the URLs they accessed belong to two distinct regions of the overall network. Such networked exposure extends beyond the direct influence that alternative news and other HAC media may exert on the public. As such we can gain greater insights into how mainstream news can be ‘weaponized’ to fit the narratives originally purported by alternative news (Goel et al., 2025). The underlying notion is that public accounts carefully curate material, selecting only news that fits an overall narrative or worldview—a pattern we term networked exposure.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined how digital trace data can be used in the context of alternative news studies. Aggregate-level trace data is automatically harvested from social media via platform APIs or systematically collected with web scraping tools, while individual level trace data is obtained through data donations or web tracking, often in combination with a traditional survey. Many existing studies draw on only one of these two data sources, however combining them can yield deeper insights into networked, second-order news exposure. Digital trace data allow researchers to study alternative news in the context of the broader information environment that users are embedded in. It taps into information sharing and

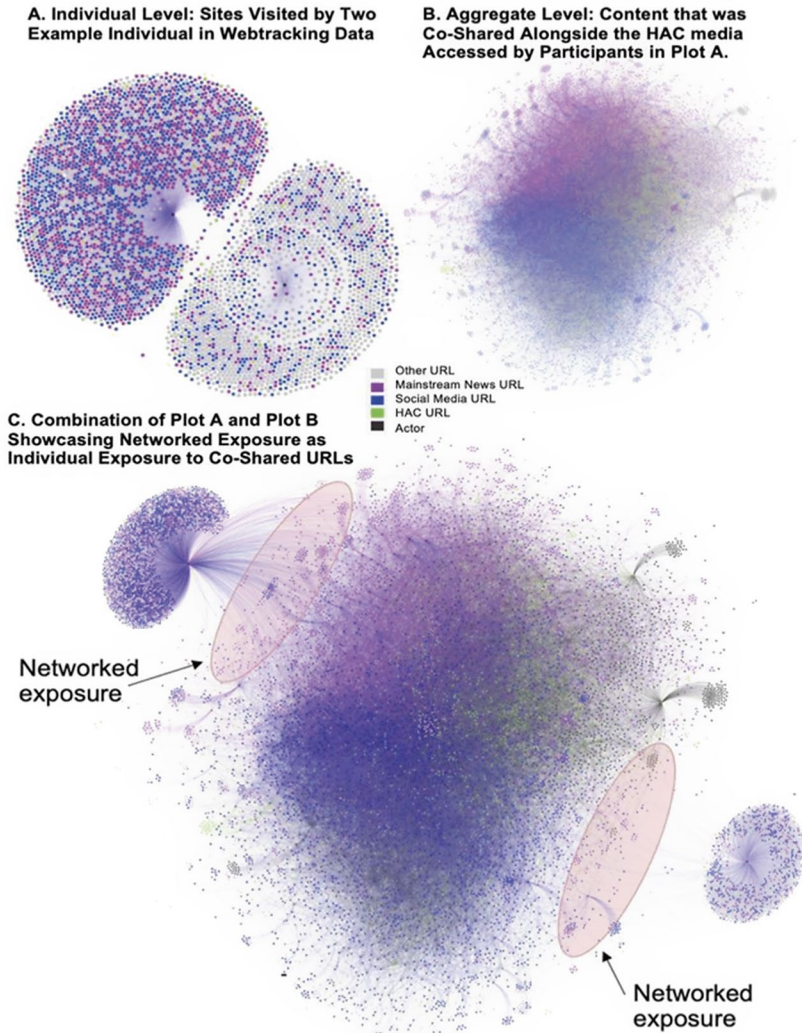


Fig. 14.1 Conceptualizing networked exposure for two example users in the data.

consumption behaviours that are not immediately apparent to users themselves or possible to predict by researchers, such as when mainstream news items are curated overwhelmingly by accounts that typically share alternative news.

Using digital trace data to study alternative media poses several technical challenges concerning data access, reliability, and consistency due to changing API policies and demanding infrastructure for tracking individual behaviour, which have been discussed in this chapter. In addition, a few ethical challenges are also present (see also Chaps. 10 and 20 in this volume). Systematically harvesting public data published by fringe and alternative actors can lead to researchers being threatened after publication. Researchers must also weigh the public interest in examining potentially harmful or extreme content against participants' right to privacy (Christner et al., 2022). Investigators should disclose data-gathering methods to protect against re-identification in cases where an actor's wish for publicity is potentially unclear.

When receiving behavioural data from individuals such as browsing data, either via data donation or web tracking, consent materials should specify the granularity of collection (e.g., full URLs vs. domains), time span, devices covered, and the analytic purposes (including any linkage to public posts or pages), consistent with GDPR guidance on specificity and informed, unambiguous consent. These practices reflect widely adopted internet-research ethics frameworks and caution that hashing/pseudonymization alone does not guarantee anonymization (Franzke et al., 2020).

Acknowledgments Parts of this research have been supported by the Carlsberg Foundation (funding code [grant number CF20-0247], the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [MA 2244/9-1] and Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung [100001CL 182630/1].

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PART III

Systemic Conditions



How the Journalistic Dimensions of Media Systems Shape the Character of Alternative Media

Stephen Cushion

INTRODUCTION

When scholars have made sense of alternative media, they have tended to interpret their characteristics through national political contexts. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, a body of scholarship grew about mostly left-wing alternative media sites attempting to challenge a conservative brand of politics and contest the corporate power of mainstream media through case studies of a particular nation or nations (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al., 2007; Downing, 1984; Downing et al., 2001). Downing's (1984) landmark book, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*, for example, predominantly focussed on the politics of US media, before examining Portugal and Italy to a lesser extent, and then ending with chapters on Czechoslovakia and Poland. Meanwhile, Atton's (2002) pioneering book largely centred on interpreting alternative media through the prism of the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). More than two

S. Cushion (✉)

School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK
e-mail: CushionSA@cardiff.ac.uk

decades into the twenty-first century, academic attention has broadly moved towards understanding the rise of far right-wing sites and their ability to shape mainstream media and political issues in areas such as immigration within national political contexts (Boberg et al., 2020; Haller et al., 2019; Heft et al., 2019, 2021; Holt, 2019; Schulze, 2020). After Trump's Presidential success in 2016, for instance, a large body of scholarship examined the influence right-wing alternative right-wing media have had in promoting the Republican leader and the wider conservative agenda (Benkler et al., 2017; Thompson & Howley, 2018). Highly partisan and conservative supporting sites, such as Breitbart News, have often been studied in the context of analyzing the degree to which they have elevated far right-wing perspectives to the mainstream news agenda (Heft et al., 2019; Kaiser et al., 2020).

But while many national case studies have advanced the field of alternative media, their design and empirically focussed conclusions have not always been more broadly connected with, or be made relevant to, other nations. This chapter makes the case for scholars to better understand alternative media according to the specific journalistic dimensions of media systems they inhabit. It explores how national journalistic cultures, and the overarching professional values and norms of media systems, inform how alternative media operate. Research has revealed, for example, that alternative media sites in some countries viewed themselves as professional journalists, whereas in other nations journalistic norms, such as impartial reporting, have been rejected (Ozgul & Veneti, 2022). In other words, alternative media sites reflect a diverse range of issues and perspectives unique to their national media and political environments, pursuing populist political causes on issues such as immigration or Brexit.

Taken together, the chapter argues that since alternative media editorially operate within rather than separate from the worlds of mainstream media and institutional politics, scholars should pay greater attention to interpreting how journalistic culture and professional values within nations that shape the editorial character and agendas of alternative media.

INTERPRETING THE CHARACTER OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SYSTEMS

Within the inter-related fields of journalism, media and communication studies, media systems have been theorized for many decades as mirroring the economic, social, and cultural character of the wider national identity. But, as this section will now explore, the focus has almost exclusively been on interpreting media systems through the prism of national mainstream media and political systems. *Four Theories of the Press*, published in the 1950s, was one of the first books to question and explain how the press had evolved over time and according to the different way national states have been controlled around the world (Siebert et al., 1956). They focussed on four main theories, which, according to the authors, created a media infrastructure that shaped the way the press functioned. For Siebert et al. (1956, pp. 1–2), “the press always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates...We believe that an understanding of these aspects of society is basic to any systematic understanding of the press”. While their focus was on the underpinning philosophies of a select few countries, into the twenty-first century studies about the comparative characteristics of media systems have become increasingly sophisticated, empirically informed and larger in scope and size. For example, Hallin and Mancini’s landmark 2004 study about 18 national media systems from Western European and North America classified a country’s characteristics according to whether they have a liberal, democratic corporatist or polarized pluralist political and journalistic identity. It took into account the journalistic and political dimensions of a country and attempted to map nations to these different groupings.

And yet despite developing nuanced measures to both differentiate but also group together national media systems, the book received some criticism about too crudely and broadly interpreting their characteristics (see Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016; Curran, 2011; Humprecht et al., 2022). In doing so, critics argued, it omitted important and significant structural differences between media systems that helped explain the type and nature of content produced cross-nationally. A consistent line of critique has centred on the grouping together of the US and UK into a Liberal model, which—it has been suggested—ignores their radically different approach to the regulation and funding of their media systems (see Büchel et al., 2016; Brüggemann et al., 2014; Curran, 2011). So, for example, the US broadcasting ecology has long been defined by its

rampant hyper commercialism, historically supported through advertising models, with limited intervention from any regulatory bodies about what should and should not be covered by different channels available to audiences (Cushion, 2012a; Pickard, 2020). The three mainstream broadcasters in the US—CBS, ABC and NBC—for instance, have long scheduled their main evening newscast at the same time, preventing American audiences having access to a plurality of news journalism. US regulation has also been light in terms of policing the nature of political reporting (Pickard, 2020). By contrast, the UK's broadcasting infrastructure was created through public service broadcasting, a system designed funded by the public via a licence fee, which, in theory, meant programming was driven by advertiser needs, but all members of the public (Cushion, 2012b). In this paternal media system, robust underpinning regulation has long been in place to ensure specific types of programming were produced, including delivering news at peak times at times not scheduled by other broadcasters.

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) book not only sparked debate about the classification of media systems, it prompted ever more nuanced comparative research about national and international trends (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016; Curran, 2011; Humprecht et al., 2022). Almost a decade later, Hallin and Mancini (2012) produced an edited book to encourage the study of media systems beyond the Western world, further highlighting the importance of empirically understanding the distinctive characteristics of national and international media systems and political cultures. And yet despite the heightened interest in understanding comparative media systems, the increasingly visible and influential role of alternative media has largely been overlooked at the expense of mainstream media. For example, the edited book, *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, just two of its 300+ pages referenced alternative media (although that was more than Hallin and Mancini's original book in 2004 that did not contain any major references to alternative media). This is not a direct criticism of Hallin and Mancini's work. A cursory flick through any book length or journal article related to media systems reveals that they have either briefly referenced the role of alternative media or ignored them entirely (Büchel et al., 2016; Humprecht et al., 2022). In a commentary—prompted by the 10-year anniversary of the publication of their landmark book—Hallin and Mancini (2016) explicitly acknowledged that “Media systems are...not static” (p. 167). They recognized that media systems

undergo long-term change, and as we have seen much of the recent research has shed important light on the nature of some of these changes. But they also are characterized by a great deal of short- and medium-term internal variation. Journalists, for example, do not act in the same way in all situations; they maybe more active or responsive to different kinds of sources in one kind of political conjuncture than in another (Hallin & Mancini, 2016, p. 167).

While the role and relevance of alternative media was not explicitly engaged with in their commentary, Hallin and Mancini (2016) pointed out that different media systems have responded in contrasting ways according to the sources and politics they encounter. Since alternative media have bow become a more prominent part of contemporary media environment, it makes sense their role should be recognized when developing media systems theory and empirical research designs. Over the last decade or so, increasingly scholars have used the phrase “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2013, p. 1) to reflect the complexity of media systems across different countries. In the words of Chadwick (2013, p. 1), a leading voice in debates about hybrid media, scholars need to map the “emerging balance of power between older and newer media technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms” within and beyond nations.

Given the significant contribution media systems theory and research has made to understanding and explaining the comparative differences between countries, this body of scholarship could arguably help interpret the nature of alternative media within national media systems. After all, alternative media have long been defined in opposition to mainstream media (Harcup, 2005, 2013; Holt et al., 2019), which means their hostility to professional journalists may be shaped by specific set of structures or have characteristics unique to that nation (Cushion, 2021; Cushion et al., 2021; Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2026). By making sense of a country’s national media system, it can help towards understanding the editorial motivations of alternative media producers, explain their output and agenda, and why users engage and interact with specific content. This was well voiced by Waisbord (2022, p. 1431) who recently argued “that alternative [media] refers to the communicative politics of contestation which take different interpretations across political contexts”, as well as being “understood in relation to other media”. This was empirically illustrated by Ozgul and Veneti’s (2022) comparative study of alternative media sites in Turkey and Greece. Drawing on interviews with producers of both

outlets, they discovered similarities in their editorial missions, including reflecting marginalized communities and offering a more human perspective than mainstream media coverage. However, they also revealed that alternative media in Greece and Turkey adopted “different strategies for presenting their messages based on the political and media contexts in which they operate” (Ozgul & Veneti, 2022, p. 1316). For example, in Greece, alternative media sites were critical of taking an impartial approach to reporting because of the uncritical way professional journalists reported austerity measures. By contrast, in Turkey, alternative media sites attempted to report impartially “in response to the increasing polarization and partisanship in the Turkish mainstream media” (Ozgul & Veneti, 2022, p. 1316). By understanding the journalistic dimensions of different media systems, the study was able to interpret the contrasting production values and editorial character of alternative media in Turkey and Greece. Similarly, through in-depth interviews with editors of alternative media in Norway, Ihlebæk and Figenschou (2026) discovered how they interacted with professional journalists based on the wider media system. They found that editors on left-wing and right-wing alternative media sites adopted radically different perspectives about mainstream media, which related to the idiosyncratic nature of the Norway’s state infrastructure, with self-regulatory bodies and professional codes of journalistic conduct. In explaining this analytical approach, Ihlebæk and Figenschou (2026, p. 5) stated that their “framework underlines how social actors’ positions and resources vary across media systems and invites comparative research”.

The relevance of these types of production studies (Cushion et al., 2021; Ozgul & Veneti, 2022; Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2026), in broader terms, demonstrates how alternative media should no longer today be interpreted as functioning in binary contrast to mainstream media. Instead, increasingly scholars today have understood alternative media as operating within the worlds of mainstream media and institutional politics rather than in isolation from them. By interpreting the character of media systems in the wider context of understanding alternative media production, content, and reception within a nation, more broadly scholars can then compare and contrast any shared characteristics in order to develop an international agenda or help paint a global picture. The next section takes up this call further by exploring a small but growing body of scholarship that has begun to interpret alternative media nationally and internationally according to the wider media system they inhabit.

DIFFERENCES IN CROSS-NATIONAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS

In a significant intervention about the meaning of alternative media, Waisbord (2022, p. 1433) has recently pointed out that:

“alternative” is a political concept, its meanings are linked to particular experiences in specific contexts. What defines alternative in democracies is different from authoritarianism. What is alternative under capitalism is not the same as in socialism. What characterizes alternative is contingent on its relation vis-a-vis dominant ideologies – liberalism, socialism, conservatism, fascism, racism, patriarchy.

This echoes, in different ways, the arguments advanced by media systems scholars for many decades. Namely, that national political environments police the boundaries of alternative media across different countries. For example, Waisbord (2022, p. 1433) suggested that alternative media in Latin America were distinctive from several European countries because it is “associated with grassroots, multicultural, progressive experiences”. By contrast, European alternative media have tended to promote right-wing agendas, driven by populist anger on issues such as rising immigration. In making sense of Latin American alternative media, it is important to put in context a shift from a history of authoritarian governments limiting media autonomy to a new political era that allows more journalistic freedoms. Using online and social media platforms, left-wing media sites have become more established alternative sources of news and information in Latin America, which—according to Harlow’s (2023) research—reflected a new social reality and promoted political participation and protest. In authoritarian systems, such as Turkey, Iran, China and Russia, journalistic freedom of expression has remained curbed, delimiting the reach and power of alternative media. Needless to say, there have been moments when alternative media have been celebrated for challenging hegemonic power in authoritarian systems (Yin, 2018). But ordinarily the state soon regain control, curtailing any sustained or long-term influence alternative media might wield within national media systems.

By contrast, in more advanced Western democracies, where a liberal brand of politics has promoted the freedom of the expression, historically alternative media have always been present within media systems even if they have had limited capacity to challenge mainstream media. Throughout

the twentieth century, the costs of producing expensive broadcast programming or distributing mass newspapers have been a constant thorn in the development of alternative media. But into the twenty-first century, new online and then social media networks made it far easier to not just produce content with limited resources but to communicate it around the world. Over time and to different degrees across nations, alternative media have increasingly converged with the world of mainstream media. So, for example, in my book, *Beyond the Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism*, different chapters explored how many alternative media sites had embraced the practices and conventions of mainstream media and professional journalism. In doing so, a mainstreaming of alternative media was identified in many national media environments, with research revealing that editors and contributors of sites in the UK draw on sophisticated production processes. For example, some alternative media sites were carefully crafting headlines to bypass social media algorithms that once limited their reach. Meanwhile, some alternative media sites had sought external regulation to legitimate their journalism, pointing to how mainstream media defended its editorial standards. While alternative media continued to editorially strive to correct or oppose the agendas of mainstream media, many UK sites were adopting the production logic of professional journalism in order to enhance their goals. In doing so, the research established that agendas of left-wing and right-wing sites were focussed on the specific characteristics of the mainstream media system in the UK. This editorial agenda of alternative media was evident not just in the analysis of content—which discovered a high volume of stories about mainstream media—as well as in the interviews conducted with editors and contributors. While left-wing alternative media sites targeted the highly partisan right-wing press, for both left-and right-wing sites there was a shared critical focus on BBC journalism, the UK's main public service broadcaster. Stories, in particular, were driven by exposing a perceived bias in professional journalism and a lack of impartiality in broadcast media (see also Cushion, 2021). This editorial focus demonstrated the importance of understanding national media systems when analyzing the nature of alternative media criticism towards mainstream media and professional journalism. The UK's mix of public and private broadcasting, and highly partisan and agenda-setting press, represents a distinctive media system when compared to many other nations (Curran, 2011). The greater use of alternative media has been connected to declining mainstream media sources from both right-wing and left-wing

perspectives. Newman et al.'s (2020) representative survey, for instance, showed trust towards professional journals among left-wing voters had waned over recent years, while Kalogeropoulos and Newman (2018) discovered faith in the BBC fell for those either holding left-wing or right-wing views between 2018 and 2020, despite the fact that public service broadcaster remained the most trusted information source overall.

In contrast, Rauch's (2021) analysis of alternative media in the US revealed that many left-wing audiences felt confident in the BBC together with the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the US. This was linked to their perceived high standards in impartial news reporting. Left-wing users of alternative media were instead most sceptical of America's highly commercialised media system, pointing to many flaws in the American professional journalism. Meanwhile, Ladd's (2013) research discovered public trust in American mainstream media was associated with coverage in alternative media. Among conservative media users with right-wing views, alternative media content appeared to encourage mistrust in mainstream media, with more cynicism about professional journalists when compared to liberal audiences with left-wing political perspectives.

As previously acknowledged, the US's media system contrasts with many other Western nations. It does not have a well-funded or widely consumed public service media infrastructure (Curran, 2011, Cushion, 2012a, 2012b; Pickard, 2020). Instead, from its birth American media has long been defined by rampant commercialisation, with its journalism driven by profits over editorial principles, and reporting of policy debates marginalized for more sensationalist coverage of politics (Cushion & Thomas, 2018; Pickard, 2020). Broadcasting has become a more ideologically driven environment, with regulation that once policed its coverage rescinded in the 1980s. In doing so, highly partisan news channels have emerged, such as *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, which serve those from right-wing and left-wing perspectives, respectively (Cushion & Sambrook, 2016). This influence spread in the online and social media age, with a shared agenda of attacking mainstream media. This has helped cultivate widespread disaffection with mainstream media and undermined the credibility of professional journalism. In the early days of cable news, partisan channels could claim they represented an alternative perspective to the world of professional journalists, but today they appear to be fully integrated into the American mainstream media system. A representative survey in 2021 revealed that 74% of respondents believed that Fox News was now part of the mainstream media, with 18% saying it was an alternative

media site and 8% who didn't know (Pew Research Center, 2021). The ever-growing use of online and social media have led to further media fragmentation in consumption habits, fuelling the political polarization of many Americans. The survey further showed that a majority of respondents either thought highly partisan sites such as Newsmax and Breitbart were either part of the mainstream media system or they didn't know (Pew Research Center, 2021). According to the Press Gazette (2025), the websites of both Newsmax and Breitbart increased their reach at the end of 2024, further reinforcing their position in the world of mainstream media.

The convergence of far right-wing alternative media agendas into the mainstream media reveals just how normalized many of these media sites have become in the minds of many Americans. A comparative study of references to left-wing and right-wing alternative media sites in mainstream media between 2017 and 2021 in the US and UK revealed that it was, by far, highly partisan American conservative sites that featured most prominently (Cushion et al., 2025). The convergence and conflation of alternative media into mainstream media helps explain why many Americans—more so than other advanced Western nations—do not easily differentiate alternative from mainstream journalism (Steppat et al., 2021). Steppat et al.'s (2021) carried out surveys in five countries—Italy, Poland, the US, Switzerland and Denmark—in order to examine the influence of alternative media in the context of contrasting levels of fragmentation and polarization. They found “the higher the level of fragmentation and polarization, the worse the perceived news performance, especially with regard to journalistic independence and objectivity”. Steppat et al.'s (2021, p. 331) conclusions were damning: “The use of alternative news media sources seems to promote people's image that the news media performs poorly”. The comparative survey also discovered that in highly polarized media environments that people cannot easily make a distinction between mainstream and alternative media, with many responding believing that alternative media were mainstream sources of information. Steppat et al. (2021) singled out responses from the US because of the characteristics of the US's media system. In their words:

...the US offers very favourable opportunity structures for alternative media, the audience of self-proclaimed alternative media is the largest of the five countries. The fact that many US respondents also name various mainstream outlets as alternative news options may be the result of many of these outlets

adopting features of alternative media to succeed in a fragmented-polarized media environment (Steppat et al., 2021, p. 16).

In short, a growing amount of research has shown that the character of media systems shapes the production and agendas of alternative media, alongside how the public engage with them, which in turn informs the degree to which there is a convergence between mainstream and alternative media.

MAPPING AND INTERPRETING JOURNALISTIC DIMENSIONS OF MEDIA SYSTEMS THAT SHAPE THE CHARACTER OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

This chapter has made the case for scholars to better understand alternative media according to the specific journalistic dimension of the media systems they inhabit. In doing so, it explored how media systems have been narrowly interpreted by scholars because historically the focus has been on mainstream media and political issues within nations. The chapter argued that the role of alternative media has either been ignored or marginalized in debates about media systems, despite their growing prominence and integration within the worlds of mainstream media and politics. Where once alternative media were largely understood in opposition to professional journalism, today many of their production practices overlap with mainstream media. Moreover, while alternative media continue to editorially focus on challenging the values of mainstream media and many of the stories produced by professional journalists, the chapter argued that the character of this coverage can be understood as a product of the wider media and political system. Or, put more broadly, national journalistic cultures, and the overarching professional values and norms of media systems, inform how oppositional or alternative media operate.

This opens up the question—how should alternative media be studied in order to interpret their agenda and character in light of the wider media environment? Adopting a media system approach to interpreting the characteristics of alternative media would begin by a comprehensive mapping of the news landscape that alternative media inhabit. Recent discussions about theorizing and researching media systems have concluded that they cannot be understood by relying on crude quantitative measures alone (see Hallin, 2020; Hallin & Mancini, 2016; Humprecht et al., 2022).

Instead, more in-depth and qualitative understanding of a country's media environment, including understanding the editorial motivations of different media, news agendas and people's consumption habits, is needed (Büchel et al., 2016; Hallin & Mancini, 2016; Hallin, 2020). It is therefore necessary to contextualize and interpret the institutions and regulatory environments that police news media within and beyond different countries. As this chapter has explored, this should involve, for example, examining the degree to which the public rely on news from public service media rather than it being commercially produced, or how journalism is regulated for objectivity, impartiality and balance, as well as understanding the partisan nature and balance of mainstream media, such as the extent to which a particular media system has a preponderance or left-wing or right-wing partisan outlets.

By developing an evidence-based review of a country's media landscape, the character of alternative media can then be assessed through empirically driven analysis of their production goals, editorial content and why its audiences value and engage with their sites. Scholars now increasingly recognise in media systems research that one study alone cannot characterize the complexity and hybridity of a particular nation (Büchel et al., 2016; Hallin, 2020; Holt et al., 2019; Humprecht et al., 2022). As Hallin (2020, p. 5784) acknowledged: "Any single study is likely either not to be generalizable to the functioning of the system as a whole, or so aggregated as to miss the specific patterns of variation that make the system what it actually is". To further develop the agenda of media systems research, what is also needed is more collaborative, cross-national studies which can help identify commonalities and differences that explain the production, content, and reception of alternative media across countries. As Holt et al. (2019, p. 866) have recommended "International comparative studies of alternative news media in different media systems would help refining our knowledge about the general characteristics of alternative news media across contexts". Similarly, in Humprecht et al.'s (2022) 30 nation study of media systems, they highlighted, among other factors, the challenges associated with the growing impact of alternative media as well as the variation in their influence across different countries. Their study concluded that "comparative research is fundamental to understanding how well different media systems are equipped to tackle these challenges" (Humprecht et al., 2022, p. 160).

Taken together, a small but growing body of scholarship has called for more multi-method, in-depth and comparative research that addresses the

increasing complexity and hybridity of media systems. The contribution of this chapter to these debates has been to not just advocate future studies taking into account the role of alternative media when understanding media systems today. But to encourage a new research agenda that requires scholars to identify the journalistic dimensions of mainstream journalism in order to better understand the reasons behind the creation, content and consumption of alternative media.

Acknowledgements The ideas in this chapter were supported by an ESRC funded project entitled ‘Beyond the MSM: Understanding the rise of alternative online political media’ (Project Reference: ES/S002510/1).

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Alternative News Ecosystems in Context: Conditions of Alternative Media Supply and Demand

Annett Heft and Eva Mayerhöffer

INTRODUCTION

The hybrid and digitized media landscape is marked by a diversification of news sources (supply) and a diversification of audiences' news repertoires (demand). In this multifaceted information and news environment, alternative information providers have emerged in a broad variety of types. These range from ideologically driven, hyperpartisan media advocating different ideological values, topic-specific, entrepreneurial ways of producing new forms of journalism to a variety of information provision by individuals operating blogs, vlogs as news influencers on social media and other digital platforms (Newman et al., 2024; Schwaiger, 2022). Such

A. Heft (✉)

Institute for Research on Far-Right Extremism, University of Tübingen,
Tübingen, Germany

Weizenbaum Institute, Berlin, Germany

e-mail: annett.heft@uni-tuebingen.de

E. Mayerhöffer

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark

information providers are part and parcel of an interrelated alternative news ecosystem that puts the diversity of actors involved in news production and diffusion and their interrelations centre stage (Wiard, 2019). News ecosystems represent “the entire ensemble of individuals, organizations, and technologies within a particular geographic community or around a particular issue, engaged in journalistic production and, indeed, in journalistic consumption” (Anderson, 2016, p. 412). Understanding the supply of and demand for alternative media, particularly online, necessitates an ecosystem perspective that acknowledges these interrelations.

This chapter focuses on hyperpartisan media as part of this alternative news ecosystem, for which the boundaries between journalism and politics are particularly blurry. Hyperpartisan alternative media can be considered hybrid infopolitical organizations that “function as partisan journalism producers, disinformation distributors, and in many cases political organizations at the same time” (Yang, 2020, p. 6; Rae, 2021). While we generally witness the rise of alternative news media and additional types of alternative information providers, this rise is not equally distributed across national contexts, nor is it equally distributed across ideological factions. More recently, there has been a particularly strong rise in the supply of and audience awareness and use of hyperpartisan media with far-right and populist radical right stances and a decline of left-wing alternatives in countries such as Sweden, Austria, or Germany (Newman et al., 2018, 2019). In countries such as the UK, also left-wing partisan sites such as the Canary or Evolve Politics to play a prominent role and attract audience attention (Cushion, 2022; Newman et al., 2019). These diverse developments signal that hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystems must be understood in light of the systemic context in which they are embedded. This leads us to focus on country-specific patterns and calls for a systematic analysis of country-specific contextual conditions that may influence the emergence and consolidation of hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystems.

In the following, we systematically discuss several central mechanisms that link particular context factors to the supply of and demand for alternative media in a given country. Focusing on systemic factors frequently addressed in comparative research on alternative media, we discuss polarization in politics and media, marginalization of fringe actors in both fields, fringe partisan network and support structures, trust in legacy media, the established journalistic field’s reaction to hyperpartisan alternative news, and media and platform regulation. We exemplify the

mechanisms and conditions under which these factors might or might not be conducive to the supply of and demand for alternative media of different ideological leanings in Europe and how these factors are interrelated. We end by discussing the challenges of researching hybrid alternative news ecosystems in context and how a systematic consideration of these factors can inform future comparative research on alternative news.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN INSTITUTIONALIZED POLITICS

If we consider the rise of hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystems as driven by their appeal as alternatives to a (perceived) mainstream (Holt et al., 2019), the extent to which institutionalized politics is polarized provides an important starting point for our discussion. Party system ideological polarization refers to the dispersion of parties on the left-right ideological spectrum. A party system is considered the more polarized the more parties split and are positioned at the extremes of the scale (Emanuele & Marino, 2024). Studies measuring party system polarization frequently rely on expert surveys classifying the positions of parties that engaged in elections or are represented in parliaments. These studies describe differences in the degree of such polarization between Western European countries and particularly in the dynamics of this development, ranging from an almost decade-long stable mid-level of party system polarization in e.g. Sweden or Germany to more dynamic developments and increases in the latest decades in the Netherlands, Belgium, or Greece (Emanuele & Marino, 2024).

The question arises to which degree high levels of party system ideological polarization foster a higher supply of and demand for hyperpartisan news, which is particularly geared to covering more radical and fringe political positions. Despite the absence of a marked increase in polarization on the institutionalized political level in, e.g., Germany and Sweden in the last decades, the hyperpartisan alternative ecosystem of news did, nonetheless, develop quite significantly in both countries (Heft et al., 2020). On the other hand, the US, which represents a deeply polarized political context and society, exhibits a particularly strong and increasingly professionalized hyperpartisan news infrastructure on the political right, in which at least some of the former “alternatives” might likely be considered

“mainstream” today (see also Chap. 15 in this volume). Similarly, the Greek political party system experienced increasing polarization since the 2000s (Emanuele & Marino, 2024), and at the same time a rise of a progressive alternative media ecosystem constituted by diverse sites with LGBT-friendly, refugee-supportive, solidarity-driven, and anti-authoritarian views (Vatikiotis & Milioni, 2019).

These contradicting examples show that the broad indicator of ideological party system polarization in the electoral and parliamentary sphere alone cannot consistently be linked to the supply of and demand for hyperpartisan alternative news. Rather, both particularly low levels of polarization, which evidence a context of homogeneous majority positions, and particularly high levels of polarization can become conducive to alternative news supply and demand, albeit in different ways. In the first situation (high level of party-political polarization), the supply of and demand for hyperpartisan alternative news can be understood as a reflection of this polarization, which fosters a demand for news aligning with existing fringe partisan views (Staender et al., 2024). Intertwined with the high level of polarization is often a “tale” of marginalization and ostracization from politics and public debate. The perceived—and often loudly proclaimed—marginalization will here directly carry over and be picked up by alternative news. In the US, we can account for a lively alternative news media scene in a high-polarized environment, where especially right-wing partisan political actors have been successful in establishing a narrative of exclusion and marginalization (Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Heft et al., 2020). In the second situation (low level of polarization), e.g., in countries like Sweden or Germany, alternative news supply and demand can result from the ostracization of fringe political actors and positions in the political sphere. Here, alternative news providers can be expected to emerge in response to a history of systematic exclusion of particular topics and positions from mainstream politics, which forces fringe positions and actors outside of the institutionalized political arena, which thus in itself appears less polarized. In countries where levels of party system polarization are contained despite the political inclusion of fringe actors, such as Denmark, the supply of and demand for alternative news is consequently lower (Mayerhöffer, 2021).

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF POPULIST AND FRINGE ACTORS

Alternative news media are often found to be more or less directly linked to the positions of (far-right/far-left) populist parties and politicians in a particular political system. Where populist parties have gained a political power position and either participate in or support a government, fringe positions have to a certain extent guaranteed institutionalized and regular access to political and public debate. Under such conditions, an alternative news infrastructure built by hyperpartisan and other alternative information providers is less necessary to create political and public attention for fringe actors and positions. For example, the broader and open acceptance of far-right views within the political spheres in Denmark, Austria, or Italy has resulted in governmental roles for far-right and populist radical-right parties already in the past, accompanied by their constant further normalization (Heft et al., 2020; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024).

Where populist, radical and other fringe political actors are systematically ostracized in the political sphere, they are also less likely to gain public visibility, e.g. by being covered in legacy media (Bennett, 1990); under such conditions, hyperpartisan alternative media are more likely to rise in supply and demand. The emergence of far-right and radical-right politics and ensuing mainstream party reactions in the party-political sphere is a striking example in this regard. Faced with increasing far-right articulations, political parties and politicians in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and France more strongly adhered to and kept up a so-called *cordon sanitaire* in the past. The *cordon sanitaire* is a strategy of collective refusal to collaborate with a party and politicians whose ideologies fall outside acceptable norms (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Axelsen, 2024; Heinze, 2018). Next to the refusal of formal collaboration, such a strategy can also foster political attempts to limit these parties' public visibility and media coverage, avoidance of joint appearances, as well as a demarcation and demonization by highlighting such positions as extreme and unacceptable (Berning et al., 2019; Bourne, 2024). In countries like Sweden, Germany, and France, the historical trajectory and roots of right-wing populist parties in white nationalism created a context where the *cordon sanitaire* strategy has been particularly pertinent, even though it in recent years has increasingly softened or become a mere symbolic declaration, particularly in local politics. Consequently, the more mature right-wing

alternative news supply and demand in countries like Sweden and Germany can be seen as a reaction to a *cordon sanitaire* that translates political marginalization into increasing activities to fill an actual or perceived niche for hyperpartisan alternative media sources (Heft et al., 2020; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021).

High polarization and marginalization of fringe actors can also go together. In Greece, the emergence of a progressive alternative media ecosystem has been linked to the (perceived) marginalization of particular positions in the face of the financial crisis, social problems and injustice. This interplay of polarization and ostracization was closely linked to the emergence of the Greek Indignant movement in 2011 and the embeddedness in an organized social movement and civil society milieu (Vatikiotis & Milioni, 2019).

NETWORK AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES OF EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARIAN POLITICS

The existence of extra-parliamentary networks between fringe parties, think tanks, social movements and political entrepreneurs provides an environment to which hyperpartisan information providers can latch on and contribute to. In such an ecosystem, political influencers, think tanks, partisan media, and fringe parties not only interact in the positioning of shared objectives and frames but also support each other, not least in economic terms. Examples show that hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystems on either side of the political spectrum profit from a dense network between different types of partisan actors. In Greece, progressive alternative media have been found to be closely connected to actors of the progressive organized social movement milieu and civil society. These media consider themselves as nodes that are involved in or even coordinate joint connective action. In these instances, long-term ties to the social movement milieu strengthen alternative media's capacity (Vatikiotis & Milioni, 2019). The German hyperpartisan alternative ecology on the far right has likewise been shown to be closely interconnected. This ecology consists of, for example, AfD-related Facebook pages frequently sharing hyperpartisan alternative far-right media, YouTube channels that position themselves against a perceived mainstream (Bachl, 2018) and a net of online shops, social media accounts and payment service providers to process revenues and donations (Rone, 2022). Where such digital networks of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actors exist and the more they are

integrated through personal, ideological, and economic ties, the more they can provide additional visibility and backing to hyperpartisan alternative media.

Alternative media not only profit from offline political and civil society networks, but also from being embedded in a broader digital ecosystem of alternative information providers. Rather than creating competition for attention, these networks positively influence their chances of visibility and connectivity. Semi- and non-professional curators such as political influencers, pundits and activists serve as important multipliers for alternative news content. In Sweden, alternative media content reaches a broader digital audience, as it has become central to the news-sharing of influential right-wing curators, which helps to consolidate the country's right-wing alternative news ecosystem (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024).

TRUST IN AND PERCEPTIONS OF LEGACY NEWS MEDIA

The alternative ecosystem of news not only develops in relation to a given political and societal context, but also in relation to the established legacy media environment. The credibility of legacy news and journalists is a central indicator of journalistic professionalism in a country (Humprecht et al., 2022), which can be severely attacked by allegations of a 'lying press' or 'fake news'. Contexts with low levels of trust in legacy news media can provide more room and prospects (demand) for media content that claims to provide an alternative to a perceived elitist or one-sided mainstream.

Distrust in legacy media reporting and traditional media sources differs considerably across European countries (Newman et al., 2024) and audiences that more regularly inform themselves through alternative media have been characterized by higher levels of legacy media distrust and criticism (Andersen et al., 2021; Brems, 2024; de León et al., 2024; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025). Research shows that what matters with respect to the professionalism of traditional journalism is the perception of the legacy media system as objective and neutral vs. elitist or one-sided, whether 'real' or as a result of populist politicization. E.g., Schwaiger (2022) links the emergence and strength of alternative digital news media in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland to users' dissatisfaction with traditional journalism, as regards the depth and strength of their investigations, their truth claims, as well as perceived political bias and political influence.

Distrust in legacy media is thus more than an expression of broader levels of institutional or social distrust. Steen-Johnsen et al. (2025) show for the case of Scandinavian right-wing alternative media that it is a lack of trust in media specifically, rather than other forms of trust that can best explain demand for alternative news (see also Andersen et al., 2021). Dissatisfaction with and distrust in legacy media plays different roles for the supply of and demand for alternative news across contexts: Cushion interprets the growth of alternative left-wing sources in the UK as a “response to a mainstream media system that is viewed as serving a right-wing ideological agenda” (Cushion, 2022, p. 1700), whereas Nygaard (2019) identifies the public perception that immigration-critical perspectives have been less present in Swedish public service media as a potential factor for a higher supply of and demand for right-wing alternative media in Sweden. Similarly, Brems (2024) found for Denmark that distrust in legacy media serves to explain demand for right-wing, but not for left-wing alternative media.

THE POLARIZATION OF THE MEDIA SYSTEM

On the systemic level of the media environment, the level of polarization within a media system is a factor that can influence the extent to which extreme views are already accommodated within the available spectrum of sources of news and the extent to which this system leaves room for the supply of and demand for additional alternative information. Studies approaching the matter from a perspective of news audience polarization measure the extent to which countries feature large news outlets with strongly left- and strongly right-leaning audiences, as opposed to news outlets with mostly mixed or centrist audiences (Fletcher et al., 2020). A low news audience polarization indicates that a media system contains many audiences in which left- and right-leaning and/or centrist people mix. Comparative studies report considerable variance between European countries in news audience polarization, with, e.g., a higher level of polarization in the UK, France and Spain as compared to a lower level in Germany, Finland, or the Netherlands (Fletcher et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2022).

Similar to our discussion of ideological polarization at the party system level, the theoretical expectations and findings regarding the effect of media system polarization are mixed and suggest two types of explanations: In general, the polarization argument links an increase in the

number of media channels to a greater supply of niche and partisan media. Thus, a high level of media system polarization can be understood as a reflection of the success of partisan information offers in the past that matched an existing demand and can further fuel a demand for reinforcing partisan views (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The highly audience-polarized context of the US is the case most often referred to in this respect as it features an active hyperpartisan news infrastructure on the right that has established itself strongly on the media market (Heft et al., 2020; Ladd, 2011; Steppat et al., 2023) and provides favourable context conditions for the distribution of distorting and misinforming content (Staender et al., 2024).

On the other hand, a low level of media system polarization does not automatically mean that hyperpartisan alternative news cannot thrive. Such media environments open market niches for alternative information suppliers that addresses audience demands at the extremes of the ideological spectrum that are not yet catered to otherwise (Heft et al., 2020). The comparatively lower levels of audience polarization in, e.g., Germany (Fletcher et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2022) actually go hand in hand with an active and established hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystem on the right that counters a perceived lack of alternative voices and positions within mainstream media and politics (Heft et al., 2020). Thus, in such contexts, there may be more room for such sites to emerge or, if already existent, to gain more audience attention.

LEGACY JOURNALISM'S REACTION TO ALTERNATIVE NEWS CONTENDERS

The actions a state takes to both support and regulate the media have always been a central contextual dimension in the description of media systems and their effects (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Humprecht et al., 2022). Alternative news ecosystems are no exception in this respect, as the possibilities of direct or indirect subsidization of news media can facilitate their establishment, while the strength of media—and increasingly platform—regulation might restrict hyperpartisan news media's actions. How the established journalistic field positions itself to alternative news contenders is thus an important factor in explaining the supply and demand for alternative news (Pedersen et al., 2024).

In many liberal democracies, but above all in so-called media welfare states, journalism is supported through a variety of direct or indirect forms of press support and media subsidies, such as tax exemptions, innovation

and start-up support through grants or loans, donations, or reduced postal service rates (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Even though the digital platform environment has enabled and fostered comparatively easy access and limited costs, news providers still need to allocate resources to establish themselves in a diversified market of news and information. If such support is also extended to journalistic newcomers, niche media and other actors at the periphery of journalism, this can considerably influence their establishment and consolidation (Kammer & Blach-Ørsten, 2025). Accordingly, alternative news outlets have been found to try to enter and profit from the journalistic field that provides resources, such as membership, accreditation, or funding (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2022), even though this may conflict with their rejection of the established media system. Established media actors may, on the other hand, try to counteract alternative news media's entry into the field (Pedersen et al., 2024). In Denmark, e.g., the criteria for qualifying for press subsidies were tightened as a direct response to right-wing alternative news outlets. To which degree alternative media can enter and benefit from inclusion in the journalistic field is related to the strength of governance units such as professional associations or press councils, which varies between media systems and political contexts (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024).

Legacy journalism can also seek to exclude alternative media in other ways. The “*cordon sanitaire médiatique*” (De Jonge & Gaufman, 2022) captures the extent to which strategies of demarcation, confrontation, or accommodation characterize legacy media's coverage of fringe actors and positions. These strategies are meant to curb the influence of fringe and radical actors but can also increase these actors' visibility and strengthen their position as ‘victims’ or outsiders opposed to a perceived mainstream. In any case, they are likely to foster the supply of and demand for alternative news. While a *cordon sanitaire médiatique* often coincides with a political *cordon sanitaire*, there are also other factors that may lead media systems to marginalize alternative forms of news production. Commercialized media environments, where a market-driven logic might be more accepting of populist communication styles, scandalization, and conflict, provide more room for extreme, unconventional, and provocative content in legacy media. Media systems that more strongly uphold the values of neutral, professionalised reporting in mainstream news will thus in turn be more likely to see an increased supply of and demand for alternative news styles and genres (Esser et al., 2016). E.g., media in countries such as Austria, Poland, or the UK have been highlighted for a populist

newsroom logic that extends beyond tabloid newspapers. Their willingness to feature sensationalism, cynical reporting on political elites, as well as a focus on conflict, strategy, and tactics, provides opportunity structures for populist actors to gain access to legacy media (Esser et al., 2016; Mazzoleni, 2008).

MEDIA AND PLATFORM REGULATION

In liberal democratic societies, media regulation is meant to ensure the freedom of the media and public expression while preventing harmful and problematic content. Stricter media and platform regulation here can negatively influence alternative news providers' chances of visibility to larger audiences and prevent certain types of alternative media content. Based on an analysis of distorting and misinforming content in alternative media in five countries, Staender et al. (2024) show that alternative media in countries with particularly liberal media laws, in this case Switzerland, display the highest prevalence of distorting content. On the other hand, stricter media and platform regulation can also create a surge in alternative media supply and demand on less-regulated, alternative platforms (see also Chap. 18 in this volume). A surge of alternative media supply and demand can thus also be an evasion strategy to a political setting that starts curtailing media freedom, as e.g., described by Ozgul and Veneti (2021) for Turkey.

Under digital conditions, media regulation becomes harder to enforce and needs to extend to the whole platform ecosystem to prevent national legal requirements from being circumvented simply by information providers registering in another location where no corresponding legal requirements (e.g., accreditation requirements) exist or are enforceable. On the ecosystem level, scholars describe an accountability gap between individual platforms and the entire ecosystem, which necessitates regulatory intervention by national and supranational institutions (Van Dijk et al., 2023). With respect to legislation concerning hate speech, disinformation, or extremist content, the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) has recently determined stricter rules for disseminating online content (European Union, 2022). As smaller platforms are not affected by such types of legislation, enforcement on larger platforms has led alternative information providers to migrate to less-regulated venues such as Russian-based VKontakte, Telegram, or Gab (Kor-Sins, 2023; Voskresenskii, 2023; Walther & McCoy, 2021). Moreover, fringe alternative news providers are already now subject to de-platforming and

algorithmic downgrading on mainstream platforms (Rogers, 2020), especially in unstable, contentious and polarized political contexts. Overall, tightened platform regulation affects the supply and demand of hyperpartisan alternative news, as it drastically decreases their visibility to a broader audience.

CONCLUSION

This chapter proposes a systemic approach to contextual conditions that may influence the emergence of hyperpartisan alternative news ecosystems. We have discussed how the supply of and demand for alternative news can be impacted by factors like polarization in politics and media, the marginalization of fringe actors in both fields, the existence of partisan network and support structures, trust in legacy media, the positioning of the established journalistic field, as well as media and platform regulation. All these factors represent generalizable national political, media-related, and societal context conditions that can inform the design of cross-national comparative research on the supply and demand of alternative news. At the same time, the outlined conditions may also play out differently across national contexts.

First, the hybrid nature of hyperpartisan alternative media situated between journalism and politics may present itself differently across countries, which can have an impact on whether political or media-related context factors are better predictors for the supply of and demand for alternative news. If hyperpartisan news sites e.g. are understood as political rather than journalistic entities by themselves or others, their relation to the established journalistic field may carry less relevance. At the same time, the search for particularly conducive conditions needs to be based on an integrative perspective across different research fields (such as political science, political communication, social movements studies or journalism) to avoid that particular context conditions are foregrounded merely as a result of the chosen research field.

Second, even though discussed one by one in the chapter, the outlined conditions are often closely interrelated. A society marked by party-political ideological polarization is likely to also show a higher level of media system polarization, trust in legacy media is likely to decrease in polarized media environments (Steppat et al., 2023), and legacy media's reaction to hyperpartisan alternative media may affect media and platform regulation. While individual political or media-system related conditions

might point to divergent expectations, it is thus their entirety and particular combination in a given setting that can help explain the prevalence and characteristics of alternative news.

Third, the context conditions addressed in this chapter can change over time, as e.g. in Sweden or Germany, where the historical party-political marginalization of populist and fringe actors recently has come under pressure. Similarly, the nature of individual alternative news outlets and their ‘alternativeness’—either in self-positioning or in their perception by external stakeholders—is not static (Steppat et al., 2023). The supply of and demand for alternative news at a given point in time must thus also consider that current supply and demand structures may reflect path dependencies of past context conditions and positioning of alternative news outlets.

This chapter has argued that national conditions are decisive in understanding alternative news ecosystems across contexts. We have proposed that the central mechanisms by which particular political, media-related and cultural context conditions shape the supply of and demand for hyperpartisan alternative news apply to alternative media of different ideological leanings. In a close-up perspective, these conditions might however play out in different ways for left-wing and right-wing hyperpartisan news providers. Here, more systematic comparative research is needed to address the interplay between national and ideological context. Overall, research on the conditions that can drive the supply of and demand for alternative news thus benefits from a comparative, cross-national perspective that remains attentive to the complex mechanisms and interrelations that determine the character and role of hyperpartisan alternative media in a particular national setting and at a specific point in time (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2026).

Acknowledgments The first author received support from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Grant numbers 16DII135 and 16DII145 (in the context of the Weizenbaum Institute). The second author received support from Independent Research Fund Denmark (DFF), grant number 2097-00026A.

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A Field Perspective on Alternative Media Criticism: Challengers on the Periphery of Journalism

Tine Ustad Figenschou and Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk

INTRODUCTION

Alternative journalism, write Atton and Hamilton (2008), is “an ever-changing effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism” (2008, p. 8). This observation points to how it is inherent in alternative media projects to correct, challenge or counter the established media (Holt et al., 2019). A fundamental critical approach to the practices, priorities and power of the established media thus represents a core dimension of alternative media outlets and their quest for legitimacy (Holt, 2019). Scholars have at the same time underlined that the relationship between alternative media and the established media is contradictory and complex: Even though alternative media are vocal critics of the established media (e.g. Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), many rely on established news media content in their own production (e.g. Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2021; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). Likewise, alternative media often mark strong opposition to the institutions and

T. U. Figenschou (✉) • K. A. Ihlebæk

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, OsloMet, Oslo, Norway

e-mail: tineuf@oslomet.no

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European*

Contexts, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_17

establishment of the professional field (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024a, 2024b; Mayerhöffer, 2021), but also seek access, membership and insider status within the same institutions and networks when beneficial (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2022). In essence, criticism and opposition to the established news media is part of alternative media's *raison d'être* but can also take paradoxical turns.

Extant studies have identified some recurrent forms of alternative media criticism against the established news media. The most common criticism is that of an alleged hidden political bias and false objectivity in the established news media. This criticism strongly indicates that journalists are political actors and fail to live up to their own core values like objectivity and impartiality (Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2019). Both far-right and left-wing alternative media criticize the established news media for political bias, causing major blind spots and bias in their reporting (Cushion, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2019). Further, alternative media recurrently criticize the established news media for being distanced from the people and aligning with and identifying with societal elites (Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2019). They also criticize that access to the established news media is limited and conditional, so that only selected sources and perspectives are included, and others muted or demonized (Chadha & Bhat, 2022; Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2022).

The present chapter discusses alternative media's role as media critics from a field perspective. It outlines how media criticism can be used strategically to gain influence and mobilize support within the broader professional journalistic field (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024b). The chapter has two main aims: It first elaborates on how the often-ambiguous field position of alternative media has enabled them to be particularly challenging media critics. Media criticism today has changed from being a conversation between 'insider critics' to a conversation where 'outsider critics' have gained more prominence and impact (see Carlson, 2017). In addition, the distinction between field insiders and outsiders has become more blurred, as the boundaries of what journalism is have become more difficult to draw (Schapals et al., 2019). This development is important because previous studies have found that the established media tend to brush off outsider criticism as uninformed, illegitimate, biased, and interest-based (Carey, 1974; Cheruiyot, 2019; Von Krogh & Svensson, 2017; Wyatt, 2007, 2019), even though most journalists support the idea of media accountability and criticism. What makes criticism from alternative media

special, then, is that it is positioned neither only as ‘inside criticism’ nor only as ‘outside criticism’.

The second aim of the chapter is to use insights from strategic action field theory to provide an analytical framework to analyze media criticism from challengers to journalism in different media contexts. This is done by elaborating on how alternative media actors position themselves on the outside, inside and/or the periphery of journalism, to gain authority as critics and mobilize support for their criticism. A key argument here is that alternative media employ a set of authority positions, which are uttered from different field positions and hold different potential for mobilizing other social actors inside and outside of journalism. Further, we argue that the enactment and positioning of criticism depend on which actors exist as targets of criticism. Hence, mapping the distance between various critics and the core of the journalistic field, and what authority positions different critics make use of, can thus inform analyses of both the motives and impact of alternative media criticism, as well as the established news media’s ability to deal with this criticism across different contexts.

THE (DIGITAL) EXPANSION OF MEDIA CRITICISM

The established news media has gone from being one of the least debated societal institutions (Carey, 1974) to being continuously monitored and scrutinized by a vast variety of participants, across digital platforms (Robertson, 2023; Wyatt, 2019). Media criticism can be defined as ongoing processes critical, non-cynic “of exchange and debate about the role and performance of the press” (Wyatt, 2007; Wyatt, 2019, p. 2). It can broadly be understood as all public debate—in and outside of the news media—that aims to clarify and evaluate media practices (Svensson, 1998, p. 177).

Traditionally, media criticism has predominantly taken place among field ‘insiders’. Internal scrutiny is conducted inside news media organizations (e.g. among editorial staff, and /or ombudsmen), but also publicly among media professionals (e.g. columns or programs designated to media criticism, trade magazines, journalism reviews, professional associations). Media criticism is also raised by external critics and contributors (e.g. external commentators, letters-to-the-editor, op-eds) and through the self-regulatory ethical system (e.g. press councils), think tanks, political organisations, academic fora etc. (Svensson, 1998; Wyatt, 2007).

Increasingly, media criticism is raised by ‘outsiders’ on digital platforms (see Carlson, 2017), such as blogs, comment sections, and social media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Wyatt, 2019). This expansion implies a diversification or democratization of media criticism, but it also represents more emotionalized, politicized, and polarized criticism—blurring the boundaries between what has previously been distinguished as criticism, cynicism, and anti-media hostilities (Carlson et al., 2021; Robertson, 2023; Panievsky, 2022; Tsfati, 2003; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Wyatt, 2019).

Contemporary alternative media have been drivers behind such bottom-up criticism, as they encourage user participation and interactivity in non- or loosely moderated comment sections and social media (Haanshuus, 2022; Humprecht et al., 2024). One illustrative example is how far-right alternative media in the Nordic and German-speaking media context often link to established media content in their social media posts and invite their readers and followers to critically engage and react to both the media content and the media outlet (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). Alternative media have also functioned as key arenas where digital hostility plays out, due to their deviant sources, controversial topics, provocative style, and contrarian analysis targeting their ‘enemies’. The most radical alternative media are characterized by open hostility towards out-groups, political authorities, and the established media (Klawier et al., 2022; Rae, 2021). Empirical studies of far-right alternative media across Western Europe and the US have shown how they drive angry engagement in social media (Humprecht et al., 2024; Tuomola & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2023), confirm and magnify users’ emotions of anger and fear (Ihlebak & Holter, 2021), and leave hostile and harassing comments from their users un-moderated (Haanshuus, 2022).

Overall, digitalization and expansion of media criticism have made the professional news media’s assessments of criticism more complicated and enabled ‘journalism-like’ peripheral actors (Maeres & Hanusch, 2023; Schapals et al., 2019) and interlopers (Eldridge II, 2019; Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018) to gain impact. As the boundaries of the journalistic field have become increasingly contested and negotiated, scholars have discussed whether alternative media should be best understood as a field of their own or as part of the larger, increasingly diverse journalistic field (see Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Peeters & Maesele, 2025, for elaboration). In this chapter we argue that it is exactly this often-ambiguous field position of alternative media as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, which have made alternative media particularly challenging media critics. To elaborate more

on how the changing insider—outsider relations is employed in alternative media criticism, we argue for employing a field perspective to alternative media criticism.

A STRATEGIC-ACTION-FIELD APPROACH TO MEDIA CRITICISM

In this chapter we propose a strategic-action-field (SAF) approach to media criticism (Fligstein & McAdams, 2011, 2012; Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2024b) to provide a framework for understanding the potential impact and ongoing contentions related to alternative media criticism. The SAF framework offers an actor-centred approach by distinguishing between key social actors in journalism, by enabling understandings of their position and power in the field, and by illuminating why some actors succeed and others do not in different political and cultural contexts. A strategic action field is always in a state of flux and there is a constant rivalry for positions, leading to big and small conflicts and contention between actors. Analytically, SAF can illuminate how groups compete for resources, but also cooperate, and how specific actors manage to convince others about a shared identity, distribution of resources, and mobilize collective problem definitions and solutions in a field.

To systematize field positions, SAF distinguishes between three types of actors; *incumbents*, *governance units* and *challengers* (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). Incumbent actors are influential players in the field, like established news organizations and news networks with long historical traditions, market shares, and a well-known brand, that normally inhabits a dominant position in the field. They are powerful insiders because institutional rules are often in their favour and collective frames are used to support their privileged position and access to resources. Governance units in journalism are internal units that oversee compliance with the rules and the general functioning of the field. In journalism, powerful institutional back-players can be professional or industry associations, journalism unions, press ombudsmen or press councils, as well as centres or institutes of journalism (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024b). Governance units often have strong alliances with incumbents, often share core values, staff move between them, and they often have a joint public position (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 77). The relative strength of the professional core of the journalistic field depends on how fragmented, politicized or polarized

the media landscape is; how strong a position government units have in society and among incumbents; and to what extent incumbents have established beneficial relations with higher education, academia, civil society, and the state (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024b). For example, in polarized media systems like the US, Poland and Italy, the journalistic field may be divided as incumbents attack each other (often in alliances with political actors), governance units are comparatively insignificant and relations between the established news media and the state are strained. In contrast the Nordic media systems are characterized by low media polarization, comparatively strong incumbents, and governance units, as well as good relations between the professional field and the state (and other external actors) (Steppat et al., 2023).

The challengers to journalism are understood as “less privileged niches in a field that recognize the rules and power position of the field, but at the same time also represent ‘alternative visions’” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 6). In general, challengers have less resources and are most often constrained by the rules of the field but can use the rules in unintended ways to create alternatives, challenge existing understandings and power dynamics and disrupt the field (*ibid.*). According to SAF, the potential impact of a social actor depends on their field position, resources, and their ability to mobilize support—what Fligstein labels ‘social skills’ (Fligstein, 2001). To succeed with mobilization behind alternative visions and building strategic alliances, challengers need sufficient knowledge about the field and who represents potential “friends, enemies and competitors” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, pp. 9–12). Further, the challenger must communicate in a way that appeals to other actors, their identities, and emotions to mobilize support (2012, p. 46). In terms of media criticism, this means that influential challengers to journalism should maintain an ‘outsider’s’ distance to what is being criticized, at the same time as critics should have an ‘insider’s’ knowledge of what is being evaluated (Wyatt, 2007). Further, challengers must communicate their criticism in ways that resonate and build support from and secure strategic alliances with other actors, both outside and inside of journalism. How distant or close challengers are positioned vis-à-vis the professional core also varies between media systems (Heft et al., 2020), and between different types of outlets ranging from anti-systemic to independent or more pragmatic positions (Ihlebak & Figenschou, 2024a). In the following section we elaborate on how alternative media have positioned themselves as media critics and

how they have communicated to build authority and support for their criticism.

BUILDING AUTHORITY AS CRITICS FROM THE PERIPHERY OF THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

To study media criticism from alternative media as challengers in or to the journalistic field, is intriguing because it stresses the importance of taking into account how authority is communicated from the periphery of journalism. These often ambiguous and paradoxical authority positions, altering between claiming insider knowledge and claiming to represent outsiders of journalism, distinguish alternative media from criticism coming from other sources, and makes it difficult to respond to for incumbents and governance units (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2024).

A first authority position as a media critic is that of an *expert of professional journalism*, someone with professional training, experience or practical skills that demonstrates comprehensive insights into how journalism works (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Critics taking this position are often former journalists or editors who have left established news journalism because they have become disillusioned with how journalism is practiced and dissatisfied with how journalism has developed in recent years. These critics can build their authority as experts on journalism by using references to production processes, editorial values, ethical codes, and mandates of professional associations etc. (ibid.). Empirical examples here include how far-right alternative media in the Norwegian context demonstrate insider knowledge about press ethics and governance units (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Further, analysis of left-wing alternative media in the UK show how they monitor established media actors closely and then regularly expose their inadequacies and mistakes by referring to established media as authoritative sources (Cushion, 2020). What is interesting here is that the very legitimacy of this criticism is built on a closeness to and knowledge of how the field works and how editorial practices and priorities should be according to professional norms and ethical codes. Alternative media actors who manage to combine this insider knowledge with the independence of the outsider critic are well-positioned to mobilize support from other actors within journalism such as incumbents and governance units, spur professional debates and even lead to corrections

and public apologies from established newsrooms. Alternative media critics taking this authority position make strategic use of established news media actors or content to strengthen their legitimacy, often by referring to professional journalists or editors arguing the inadequacies of editorial practices and priorities. They do this to substantiate their critique and increase their legitimacy as experts through referring to more established, authoritative sources (Cushion, 2020).

A second and related authority position is that of claiming *expertise on issues*, building on thematic knowledge based on the critics' professional or educational background or self-taught analytical skills (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). When alternative media criticize the established news media from this position, they often propose issue-specific criticism based on the coverage of politicized issues such as mass immigration, Islamization, crime, social justice, climate change, gender etc. Claiming topical expertise, alternative media critics will often argue that important dimensions, voices, perspectives, or facts are omitted from the media coverage, potentially misleading the public (Cushion, 2020). The most typical empirical examples here is how far-right alternative media are more oriented towards issues of Islam, immigration and immigration crime (e.g. Brems, 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022), and hence criticize the media coverage of these from an authority position of a topical expert (see Chap. 6 on alternative epistemic authorities). Alternative outlets positioned on the far-left, on the other hand, are more preoccupied with social issues, capitalism, and climate change (Cushion, 2020). To gain authority as issue-specific experts, alternative media actors represent themselves as thorough (and bold) analysts (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2025). Similar to the journalistic expert position outlined above, both Norwegian far-right and British left-wing alternative media have been found to strengthen this authority position by building on the criticism from academic experts or reinterpretations of data from official bodies (Cushion, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2025). These two expert positions—journalistic and topical—are often used in combination, and the criticism is substantiated by criticism from field insiders (professional journalists, editors, academic researchers), representing powerful potential allies to mobilize support and magnify the critique. In contrast to field insiders, alternative media also mobilize and build on rogue 'experts' working outside of and often condemned by established institutions as demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Harambam, 2023; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, forthcoming).

A third authority position is what we have labelled the *citizen position* (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019) and represents a populist people-centric position from which alternative media criticise ‘media elites’. The citizen position builds on alternative media actors’ identification with and claim to represent the lived experiences and perspective of ordinary people. This authority position builds on broader populist anti-elitism, claiming that media professionals are part of an educated cultural elite that do not understand or care about the general population (Fawzi, 2020; Krämer, 2018). The media elite is further portrayed to be part of the political establishment, betraying the struggles and needs of ‘ordinary’, lower-class people are underrepresented by the established media; to protect the interests of the societal elites (Fawzi, 2020; Krämer, 2018). In contrast to the professional expert position outlined above, critics taking the citizen authority position claim authority as representatives of ‘the people’, stressing authenticity, social and professional distance to and distrust in journalistic actors and networks. Empirically, most studies have focused on far-right alternative media here, but in a recent study we find this position used among alternative media in Norway across ideological leanings (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2025). Claiming to represent «the people», the citizen authority position is characterized by a bottom-up perspective to the media. This type of criticism has a strong appeal in societies in which populist political actors are influential, the media system is polarized and politicized, and substantial voter groups support far-right or left-wing political movements (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Fawzi, 2020; Krämer, 2018; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023).

In the European context, the growth of far-right populist movements has enabled alternative media to create alliances, either through direct and strong bonds to (populist) political parties or more informal political partisanship (Brems, 2023) (also see Chap. 16). By giving voice to populist politicians, amplifying their agenda and criticism of their enemies—alternative media critics with close political affiliations can claim popular legitimacy as representatives of the people, at the same time as their populist criticism is echoed and boosted by populist politicians and movements, who again use affective and emotional rhetoric to win over citizens with populist world-views (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Fawzi, 2020; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023). Hence the field position here is paradoxical as media critics using the citizen position to strategically frame themselves as ‘outsiders’ together with the people, at the same time as they in many political contexts are positioned close to or in the very centre of the political field

(e.g. Chadha & Bhat, 2022; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023).

The fourth authority position for alternative media criticism is that of victimhood (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, 2025). Broadly understood, *the victimhood position* builds on the experience of being silenced, censored, or demonized by the ‘mainstream news media’ and the political establishment, but also from being victim of other external forces and societal elites enabled by the media (Roberts & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020). The legitimacy here is gained from being treated unfairly by the media and from being victims of cultural displacement, and the legitimacy is grounded in having experienced such mistreatment and injustice (experiential legitimacy) and/or by representing others who have gone through similar experiences (Roberts & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020). Evoking the victim position can be used to mobilize support from other actors that have experienced such criticism; and portray alternative media as courageous counter-voices fighting for freedom of speech and as platforms where subaltern voices can freely speak their mind (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Roberts & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020). Criticism based on victimhood often takes the form of sharing first person experiences and examples of exclusion and stigma (ibid.). Today, the victimhood position is used politically and strategically among an increasing number of political actors, to gain recognition, sympathy, and authority. Chouliaraki’s (2024) conceptualization of the political use of victimhood can help to understand the mobilising potential of this position: One key point here is how victimhood is built on ‘claims to suffering’ that accrue moral status to the claimant and attach responsibility to other actors (perpetrators and benefactors), and how it is communicated through vocabularies of psychological and social suffering (ibid.). Another key point is how victimhood should be understood as a communicative act that does not necessarily reflect the victims’ social position and vulnerability but can also be used strategically and politically (ibid.). For alternative media critics the victim position thus has broad potential for strategic alliances with other groups who claim to experience cultural displacement, unfair treatment, and silencing, often resonating with groups and individuals positioned on the far-right, such as far-right populist politicians or contrarian opinion-leaders (Kunst et al., 2020). By employing the citizen authority position and the victim authority position, alternative media frame the established news media and other political opponents as ruthless, mob-like and rude, going after alternative media actors and their political allies with a fundamental lack of morality

and decency (Roberts & Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020). Recent empirical examples here are how anti-covid measures activists in Norway and the Netherlands mobilize with and through alternative media, based on institutional mistrust and a shared experience of being silenced and ridiculed by the media, political and medical establishment (Harambam, 2023; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, forthcoming). These claims can gain legitimacy when communicated from an outsider-position, but they can also be used strategically from alternative media actors positioned closer to the core of the journalistic field.

The final authority position that we have identified is that of alternative media *as radical activists* (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Activist criticism is typically enacted by the most anti-systemic and/or extremist alternative sites which seek to build authority as critics through radical strategies, using direct physical or online confrontations with reporters. These confrontations can take the form of confrontational interviews, secret recordings, exposure of journalists off duty etc. The main aim here is to expose journalists' misbehaviour, manipulation or 'double standards' and to actively confront journalists with the fact that they do not practice what they preach. Although exposure of double standards is a technique broadly used by alternative media critics (Cushion, 2020), the antagonist position stands out by its confrontational, almost aggressive style. This authority position inverts and manipulates journalists, by secretly recording, and/or confronting journalists both off-duty and at work. Illustrative examples from Sweden include how a well-known climate journalist was sneak-filmed at the airport when going on holiday with his family—to expose his hypocrisy; how journalists are called up, confronted and secretly recorded on the phone—and the recording is published to demonstrate their ignorance; or when alternative media critics meet up at the newsroom to 'deal with', 'beat up' or confront editors or reporters; or when alternative media critics turn the camera around to film reporters covering them (see Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2024). This authority position is primarily used by antagonist and extreme alternative media actors, which in most contexts have poor understandings of journalism, limited resources, limited impact, and few potential allies behind their confrontations. At the same time, this strategy can severely hamper professional autonomy and individual safety, which can have a chilling effect.

CONCLUSION

Media criticism is part of ongoing positioning and power dynamics in the journalistic field. In this chapter we have demonstrated how the ambiguous field position of alternative media enables them to practice and communicate media criticism from a variety of authority positions and thereby form strategic alliances with other critics. Overall, to what extent alternative media critics are successful depends on how well their criticism of incumbents and governance units resonates with and mobilizes support from other social actors in a media system or political context (Fligstein & McAdams, 2011). In fragmented and polarized social environments, right-wing and left-wing alternative media sites are more likely to gain sympathy for their position and media criticism by media or political actors that are sympathetic to or even share their political stance. Alliances can be formed by creating networks with other alternative media engaging in joint criticism of the media, by building engagement and visibility on social media platforms, and by mobilizing other social actors who share the same critical evaluations and criticisms (i.e. experts, politicians). If successful, consequences can increase distrust and scepticism towards journalism, changing power dynamics and the end of existing fields. This trend is currently very visible in the US context, where the journalistic institution is under attack from a variety of social actors, including incumbents, alternative media, and politicians (Reese, 2021).

The field approach outlined in this chapter enables a more precise analysis of how media criticism from individual alternative media can impact power dynamics and contentions in journalism. First, by acknowledging that alternative media are ambiguous players in the journalistic field, we can be more aware of the many authority positions and discursive strategies they employ. By positioning alternative media critics within different national contexts and how their position can change over time and between critics, we can improve our understanding of both how different alternative media seek to attack journalism, what other social actors they share interests with and their potential for mobilization. Second, a field approach can inform future comparative research as it enables empirical mappings of the relative impact of governance units across contexts: We know that which actors represent the core of the field (incumbents and governance units), how united or divided they are, and how strong their position is vis-à-vis other actors and challengers to journalism will impact

both the enactment of criticism by alternative media and how successful alternative media are in gaining support from other actors.

Taking a field approach to alternative media criticism, we recommend that future studies identify the key social actors in the national media and political context studied. We need more studies of the impact of criticism from alternative media—how incumbents and governance units assess the criticism from alternative media, and if and how they respond. Faced with digital media criticism, journalists often seek to protect journalistic discourse by underlining the legitimacy of professional journalism, maintaining the boundaries of the journalistic field, and distinguishing ethical practices from unethical behaviour (Cheruiyot, 2024). Overall, journalists take critics positioned inside of journalism more seriously (Pedersen et al., 2024; Svensson, 1998; Wyatt, 2007), indicating that it is the alternative media criticism based on professional authority that will gain the most attention and weight from journalists. At the same time, as politicized, populist media criticism has gained momentum over the last decade and put new and unprecedented pressure on journalists, we need more analyses of the role played by alternative media in these networks and strategic alliances, and how these forms of criticism affect journalism.

Acknowledgments This work was supported by the Norwegian Research Council (project number 295985).

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Alternative Social Platforms as Opportunity Structures for Alternative News

Lena Frischlich and Heidi Schulze

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms, including social media, have deeply penetrated everyday life worldwide (Mahl et al., 2024). In 2024/2025, the average global user held accounts on 6.8 social media platforms (Thompson, 2025), and 44% of 18- to 24-year-old media users worldwide reported social media platforms as their primary information source (Newman et al., 2025). This *platformization*, i.e., the transformation of entire societal sectors through digital platforms' penetration of social life (van Dijck et al., 2018), also changes the context in which alternative news is created, disseminated, and consumed.

In this chapter, we examine the specific *opportunity structures* for alternative news creators and audiences on social media platforms, focusing specifically on different types of *alternative social media*. To this end, we will first outline the core constructs and theoretical background that guide

L. Frischlich (✉)

Digital Democracy Centre, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark
e-mail: lefr@sam.sdu.dk

H. Schulze

Department of Media and Communication, Ludwig-Maximilians-University,
Munich, Germany

our work. We then describe and discuss distinct types of alternative social media platforms, situated within this background. Finally, we consider the socio-technological opportunity structures that arise for alternative news creators and audiences within these distinct platforms.

CORE CONSTRUCTS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Alternative News

In this chapter, we follow the relational definition of alternative news, understanding it first and foremost as outlets that position themselves as “corrective” and “alternative” to the respective socio-cultural and historical mainstream (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). From this perspective, alternative and mainstream news are best understood as a spectrum encompassing different types of alternative news (e.g., Frischlich et al., 2020), which may adopt either a more agonistic (i.e., reform-oriented) or antagonistic (i.e., destructive) stance towards the societal, media, and political mainstream (Eldridge II, 2025) and that can vary, for example in their political stance and business model (Schwaiger, 2022).

Opportunity Structures

Opportunity structures refer to the external (“exogenous”) factors within a system that contribute to the success of an individual, entity, or concept within that system. These factors can be identified at both the macro level of society and the meso level of specific contexts, such as social media or discourse. At the macro level, for example, the performance of mainstream parties predicts the success of right-wing extremist parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006), and the success of alternative news varies across countries in relation to the respective media system (Heft et al., 2021). At the meso level of social media logics, social media’s enabling of direct connections between users, algorithmic recommendations, and people-centric communication channels provides an ideal fit for populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017), such as often found in alternative news (Frischlich et al., 2020). With regard to specific discourses (McCammon, 2013), ideas can be perceived as more “sensible, realistic, and legitimate” (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004, p. 198) when they are more (1) visible (i.e., more often covered in established news); (2) resonant (i.e., engaged with

both positively and negatively), and (3) legitimated (i.e., when the reactions are, on average, more often positive than negative).

From the perspective of the psychological theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970), opportunity structures shape human behaviour by influencing social norms surrounding specific behaviours and through various behavioural opportunities, such as those rooted in the design choices of digital platforms. For example, the visibility of an idea, actor, or concept, as well as its legitimization, can also be understood as the emergence of perceivable norms regarding the matter. Norms alone are, however, not enough: whether people publish a video about this idea also depends on whether video uploads are possible at all.

Digital platforms thus actively shape opportunity structures, including for alternative news, both through setting norms in their terms of service (ToS) and, specifically, through their governance in the form of algorithmic recommendations and moderation practices, but also through their technical features (e.g., whether they enable one-to-one or one-to-many communication), the bundling of these features across different genres (e.g., publication-oriented versus social media platforms versus instant messaging platforms (Frischlich et al., 2022)), and, centrally, their technical affordances.

Technical Affordances

Behavioural opportunities often emerge from platforms' distinct *technological affordances*, the perceived "possibilities for action emerging from the relation between [a platform's] features and the user" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 37). The *affordances* concept, originating in perceptual psychology, refers to how individuals perceive their environment based on the opportunities it offers them (Gibson, 1979). Essentially, environmental features (e.g., other animals or trees) provide different action possibilities ('affordances') depending on a species' needs and motivations (e.g., food, mating). Online, affordances describe the "possibilities for users arising from the technical features and design decisions made by website operators and platform companies" (Schulze et al., 2024, p. 189) and reflect the variety of human behaviour that can emerge in the same context (Davis & Chouinard, 2016).

Affordances are typically referred to using adjective nouns such as anonymity, visibility, collectivity, or interactivity. Platforms of different genres can differ in their affordances (e.g., publication-oriented platforms such as

YouTube enable a different form of interactivity than instant messaging services like WhatsApp); however, affordances can also vary between platforms of the same genre (e.g., WhatsApp affords less anonymity than Signal). Two recent scoping reviews have linked differences in technical affordances to (far-right) online radicalization (Kakavand, 2024; Schulze et al., 2024), concluding that visibility, anonymity, and collectivity are particularly well-studied in this context. These three affordances are also crucial for understanding opportunity structures for alternative news.

Visibility (or scalability, Boyd, 2010) refers to the potential to extend the reach of one's content either on the platform (internal visibility) or beyond (external visibility). Internal visibility is rooted in features enabling creators to present themselves and their content. This includes profiles, algorithmic recommendations, and the ability to build an audience (e.g., through subscriptions to one's content or forwarding content). External visibility is rooted in features such as the shareability of one's content across platforms (Schulze et al., 2024), but also depends on factors that "facilitate broad public reach" (Schulze et al., 2024, p. 199), such as the popularity of the platform, sender, or topic.

Anonymity (or lack of identifiability) is rooted in features that (a) enable anonymity *on* the platform and towards other users ('social anonymity', Rogers, 2020), or that (b) enable anonymity *towards* the platform operators ('technical anonymity', Christopherson, 2007). Social anonymity enables users to engage with the platform and build social connections while maintaining privacy from other users (Rogers, 2020). Centrally, social anonymity is also described as "perceived" anonymity, as the focus lies on individuals' perceived non-identifiability rather than their actual anonymity. Technical anonymity refers to the degree to which users remain unidentifiable to the platform and its operators, rather than to other users. It is maximised when no registration is required.

Collectivity describes how platforms can enable the formation and maintenance of communities by "creating a collective identity-forming opportunity structure for users" (Schulze et al., 2024, p. 202). Collectivity builds upon features that support shared interests (e.g., hashtags, subreddits) or virtual group spaces, and benefits from features that enable self-presentation in terms of group-based identities (Schulze et al., 2024). It unfolds its full potential only when users identify with the respective group (Schulze et al., 2024). In this sense, it can be considered a meta-affordance (ibid.) that requires the actualization of other affordances such as reciprocity and connectivity (Kakavand, 2024).

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Drawing on the relational understanding of alternative news (Holt et al., 2019), we understand alternative social media platforms primarily through their (self-)positioning as ‘corrective’ and ‘alternative’ to the respective socio-cultural and historical mainstream (Frischlich et al., 2022). Like alternative news, alternative social media platforms can enact their alteritativeness on different key dimensions: Their self-positioning and governance routines, their business model, or their technical set-up and affordances.

Self-Positioning and Governance

Alternative social media can position themselves as part of alternative systems such as the right-wing “Alt-Tech” system (Jasser & Wankmüller, 2020). They can also be perceived as an alternative for users embedded in a different socio-cultural or legal context (e.g., the US versus China or Russia), or they may present themselves as open-source, distributed alternatives (e.g., social media platforms in the Fediverse, such as Mastodon). This self-positioning affects their governance practices (see e.g., Otero & Scharlach, 2025, for the alt-tech system).

The boundaries between alternative normative orientations and mainstream social media norms can change over time. For example, after Elon Musk acquired Twitter in 2022, he aligned the platform’s policies with far-right ideological positions, which coincided with sharp rises in hate speech (Hickey et al., 2023). Similarly, after Donald Trump’s re-election in 2024, Meta revised its content moderation guidelines to permit “demands for exclusion and offensive language around political or religious topics, for example, transgender rights, immigration, or homosexuality” on its platforms (Meta, 2025). Nevertheless, while such moderation practices may resemble those observed on alternative platforms in particular instances, Meta’s positioning reflects the current Zeitgeist under Trump’s presidency rather than constituting an actual alternative to the (US-American) political mainstream.

Business Model

Alternative social media platforms often rely on crowdfunding, donations, or value-aligned investors. For example, Signal, a high-privacy alternative

to WhatsApp, is a non-profit organization relying on donations (Whittaker & Lund, 2023). Mastodon is developed by a non-profit organization, but users can also donate (Mastodon, 2025). As another example, the Alt-Tech microblog Gab seeks investors, supporting its “Christian faith in Jesus” values (Gab.com, 2025, p. 2), and high-ranking members of the Trump administration have financed Gettr (Paudel et al., 2022).

Technical Set-Up and Affordances

On a more technical level, most alternative social media platforms offer similar features and genres to their mainstream counterparts but differ in their underlying technical infrastructures and their affordances. For example, alternative social media often rely on peer-to-peer networks such as blockchain (Nagappa, 2023) and open protocols. A prominent example is the *Fediverse* (short for *federated universe*), which encompasses platforms such as Mastodon or Pixelfed (Riemann et al., 2022). The logic behind the Fediverse is similar to e-mail technologies: users can choose any provider and still communicate with everyone else. This crucially enhances the shareability and thus the *visibility* of one’s content across platforms. However, they are typically used by only a minor share of the population (Frischlich et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2025; Stocking et al., 2022), which can negatively impact external visibility. Alternative social media also tend to attract a smaller and more homogeneous user base than mainstream platforms (Bovet & Pierri, 2025; Zannettou et al., 2018a). This can contribute to experiences of *collectivity* (Collins, 2025; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022).

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: A TYPOLOGY

Importantly, alternative social media platforms are not homogeneous, nor do they all promise the same benefits for all types of (alternative) news creators and audiences. For example, Bluesky users tend to share more left-leaning news and comparatively few, if any, links associated with untrustworthy (alternative) news sites (Bovet & Pierri, 2025). To explain these differences, we introduce four types of alternative social media platforms, each providing distinct opportunity structures: *Social counter-media*, *fringe communities*, *context-bound alternative social media platforms*, and *reform-oriented social media platforms* (Frischlich et al., 2022). We will describe them in the following and provide a detailed overview in Table 18.1.

Table 18.1 Types of alternative social media platforms

	<i>Social counter-media</i>	<i>Fringe Communities</i>	<i>Context-bound alternatives (in the West)</i>	<i>Reform-oriented alternative social media platforms (in the West)</i>
Examples	Gab, Gettr, truth social, Parler, rumble, BitChute, odysee.Tv, DLive, Telegram	4chan, 8kun, specific Telegram channels/chat groups, specific subreddits	WeChat, Bilibili, early TikTok, VKontakte	Fediverse (e.g., mastodon, Pixelfed), Bluesky
Self-positioning	Antagonistic	Antagonistic	Neither nor, rather competitors	Agonistic
Governance	Focus on “free speech” as safety from moderation and “woke” censorship.	Focus on community cultures, rejection of interferences, tolerance for deviant content.	Embedded in local regulatory frameworks, cross-language moderation might be diminished.	Focus on users’ privacy and surveillance anonymity.
Business model	Ideological investments, crowdfunding, and subscriptions.	Lean workforce, automation, subscriptions.	Advertisement-based, partially tied to authoritarian governments.	Ideological investments, crowdfunding, and subscriptions.
Technical set-up	Partially: Decentralized, not interoperable, partially hosted on proprietary servers, mostly publication-oriented platforms.	Mainly focus on features enabling many-to-many communication, so far mostly digital platforms.	Similar to the respective local mainstream social media platforms.	So far, particularly microblogging and instant messaging apps.

(continued)

Table 18.1 (continued)

	<i>Social counter-media</i>	<i>Fringe Communities</i>	<i>Context-bound alternatives (in the West)</i>	<i>Reform-oriented alternative social media platforms (in the West)</i>
Visibility (internal)	Medium to high: Homogeneous, radical, but small user base, algorithmic recommendations available, but might benefit popular actors.	Medium: (almost) no algorithmic recommendation, no creator-centred set-up, community votes determine popularity. Externally: Relatively low, as content might not make it directly to “big” news, but diffusion through other alternative platforms and super spreaders is possible.	Similar to the respective local mainstream social media, but internal visibility is language dependent.	Medium to high: Smaller, relatively homogenous user base, lack of algorithmic recommendation.
Visibility (external)	Low: Shareability of content, but low popularity of the platform and often ostracised actors.	Low & indirect: Sharing of content by users is central, acts as a breeding ground for deviant content.	It can be high when platforms become mainstream (TikTok) or content crosses language borders.	Low to medium: Small user base, but increasing adoption by politics and mainstream media.
Collectivity	High: Homogeneous user base, us-versus-them positioning and hateful content.	High: Social anonymity, group-centredness.	Similar to the respective local mainstream.	Medium: Homogeneous user base.
Anonymity (social)	Low to medium: Similar to local mainstream social media platforms.	Medium to high: Anonymous posting possible.	Low: Similar to the respective local mainstream.	Medium: No by default social anonymity, but pseudonyms are possible.

(continued)

Table 18.1 (continued)

	<i>Social counter-media</i>	<i>Fringe Communities</i>	<i>Context-bound alternatives (in the West)</i>	<i>Reform-oriented alternative social media platforms (in the West)</i>
Anonymity (technical)	Medium: Registration requires only a disposable email or phone number, platforms occasionally cooperate with intelligence agencies.	Medium to high: Registration requires only a disposable email or phone number/ or is not needed.	Low: Similar to the respective local mainstream.	Medium: Registration requires only a disposable email or phone number.

Social Counter-Media

Social counter-media are platforms that mimic the features and functionalities of their mainstream counterparts but position themselves as serving as safe havens for those banned from, or otherwise feeling marginalized on, “mainstream” social media platforms. Examples include *Gab*, *Truth Social*, *Telegram*, *Rumble*, *BitChute*, and *Odysee.tv*. Others have described them as “dark platforms” (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) or linked them to “platform conspiracism” (Mahl et al., 2024). Social counter-media in the Global North-West typically take an antagonistic stance towards mainstream social media platforms, accusing Big Tech of “censorship” and “woke” policies, often positioning themselves as part of the right-wing Alt-Tech System. Their governance model is minimal, and they reinterpret user safety as safety *from* moderation and censorship (Otero & Scharlach, 2025), while disregarding the safety needs of other user groups. For example, the microblogging platform *Parler* promises its users: “Your voice matters here [...]. This is your space to be real, be rewarded, and be heard—unmuted and unrestricted” (*Parler*, 2025). These platforms often tolerate actors who have previously been banned from mainstream social media platforms (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Fielitz et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020), allowing them to sustain and even increase their activity (Mekacher et al., 2023). Content-wise, these platforms host more unfounded conspiracy theories (Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024) and far-right content than their mainstream counterparts (e.g., Zannettou et al., 2018b). In terms of their

business model, current (Western) social counter-media primarily rely on crowdfunding and ideologically aligned investors (e.g., Gab.com, 2025).

Regarding their technical functionalities and affordances, social counter-media often mimic their mainstream counterparts. Currently, there is a mushrooming of various publication-oriented platforms, including microblogs such as *Gab*, video-hosting platforms such as *BitChute* or *Odysee.tv*, *DLive* for live streaming, or *Telegram*'s channel function. These social counter-media promise *visibility*. As stated in Odysee.tv's community guidelines, "Making your opinion public. It can be factually wrong, emotionally charged, or completely biased" (Odysee Help Hub, 2025). However, BitChute's algorithm benefits only single creators (Siapera, 2023), and the user base of social counter-media is comparatively small (Johnson et al., 2022; Stocking et al., 2022), suggesting that visibility on these platforms is far narrower than on mainstream social media platforms. Instead, social counter-media hosts comparatively radical communities (Hohner et al., 2024a, 2024b; Stocking et al., 2022), suggesting that the *collectivity* found there is of particular relevance for radical and extremist users. Content analyses confirm that radical content is rewarded within these communities (Jasser et al., 2021). Finally, social counter-media promise higher levels of *anonymity* than their mainstream counterparts. Users are typically able to participate under pseudonyms, register with disposable phone numbers and email addresses. Social counter-media also typically share less data with advertisers (Siapera, 2023) or employ end-to-end encryption (Wimkin, 2025). However, once the device itself has been seized, users can often be de-anonymised and subjected to legal prosecution (Johnson et al., 2022).

Fringe Communities

Fringe communities position themselves as targeting specific subcultures and often operate according to communication logics and rules that outsiders cannot grasp easily (Colley & Moore, 2020). Examples include message boards like *4chan* or *8kun* (Baele et al., 2021), as well as the now-defunct news aggregator *Voat*. Such communities can also emerge within other platforms, for example, in conspiracy-theoretical groups on *Telegram* (Schulze et al., 2022; see also Chap. 19) or in specific *subreddits* such as *r/the Donald* (e.g., Gaudette et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2019).

Governance routines differ across fringe communities, but particularly *4chan* and similar discussion boards are infamous for hosting deviant

content. For example, 4chan allows racism and porn only on specific boards (e.g., /b/) rather than banning such material across the site (4chan, 2025). The platform has also been called out repeatedly for hosting violent extremism, unfounded conspiracy theories, and blatant hatred (Baele et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2021; Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024). This strategy enables a “cheap” technical and moderation setup (for a report about 4chan, see Price, 2015). For example, Telegram reportedly employs only 30 people (TechDesk, 2025).

Collectivity and anonymous exchange are central affordances for fringe communities (Bernstein et al., 2011). Users typically do not have to register, or they can register via disposable phone numbers and email addresses. Currently, fringe communities are mostly found on digital platforms organised around the exchange between users on specific topics. This equality-oriented set-up can contribute to perceptions of collectivity, specifically as anonymous environments can increase the salience of collective identities (Postmes et al., 1998). While the user base of fringe communities is small and individual visibility is limited, these platforms do play a central role in the creation of deviant content. For example, hateful memes are often built and tested on 4chan, with only the “best” ones disseminating later to other social media platforms (Zannettou et al., 2018b).

Context-Bound Alternative Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms that represent the “mainstream” in one context can appear as alternatives in another, even without adopting an explicit antagonistic or agonistic stance in their self-positioning. For example, Big Tech platforms rooted in the Silicon Valley, such as Facebook and YouTube, have Chinese counterparts that often offer similar features and functionalities, while adhering to Chinese politics. Popular examples include *WeChat* (instant messaging), *Weibo* (microblog), and *Bilibili* (video publishing) (‘2025 Guide’, 2025). Other examples include Russia’s *Vkontakte*, which mimics Facebook.

Context-bound alternatives generally address the same mainstream audiences as their respective counterparts. However, their embeddedness can become politicized. For example, the Chinese app TikTok was banned in the US in 2024 due to alleged ties to the Chinese government (He, 2024). After his re-election, Donald Trump repeatedly paused the ban, claiming that wealthy investors would like to buy TikTok (Lutkevich, 2025), a deal that was completed in 2026. As another example, Russia

banned Meta after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (for media coverage, see Sauer, 2022).

Context-bound alternative social media platforms often operate under different norms than their local mainstream counterparts, which can lead to unique expression spaces. For example, content by Russian alternative news RT and Sputnik for German and Scandinavian audiences continued to spread via VKontakte after being banned in the European Union following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Henriksen et al., 2024). As another example, only 6% of Arabic hate speech is moderated on Facebook prior to publication (for a media report, see Milmo, 2021). The business model of context-bound alternatives is typically advertisement-based. Yet, there may also be political ties. For example, while the company behind TikTok, ByteDance, claims independence from the Chinese government, Human Rights Watch pronounces the threat for business leaders who fail to follow government directives (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Moreover, the Chinese government holds a seat on the company's board (Reuters, 2021).

Context-bound alternative social media platforms broadly offer the same technical set-up as their (local) "mainstream counterparts". Individual platforms can, of course, differ in specific features (e.g., short videos on TikTok), but successful features are often replicated rapidly (e.g., Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts).

Reform-Oriented Alternative Social Media Platforms

Reform-oriented social media platforms take an agonistic stance. They often position themselves as reformatory projects, criticizing the dominance and data-driven business models of Big Tech while promising a more user-centred experience (Riemann et al., 2022). Examples include instant messengers Signal and Threema or the platforms of the *Fediverse* (e.g., Mastodon, Pixelfed), or the microblog *Bluesky*.

Several reform-oriented platforms are based on decentralization. This prevents the enforcement of central norms or moderation routines. For example, each instance in the Fediverse operates under its own rules and is responsible for compliance with legal requirements such as the European Digital Services Act (Van Rijnsouw & Verboom, 2024). The community accordingly plays a central role in the bottom-up creation of descriptive norms. For example, when Gab attempted to integrate into the Fediverse to avoid being deplatformed, the other instances refused to communicate,

ultimately forcing Gab to defederate itself (Eleanor, 2019; Rozenshtein, 2023). Other platforms experiment with combining user- and platform governance. The microblogging platform Bluesky, initially founded as part of Twitter but operating independently since 2021 under CEO Jay Graber, allows users to customize the automated moderation of content and to add additional moderation services (The Bluesky Team, 2024). Like social counter-media, reform-oriented alternative social media platforms are often non-profit organisations that rely on donations as a business model (Mastodon, 2025; Whittaker & Lund, 2023) or “value-aligned investors” (The Bluesky Team, 2023), and crowdfunding or paid-for services (e.g., Threema).

In their technical set-up, reform-oriented alternative social media platforms often centre on users’ privacy and control over the content they see. For example, users can access several customization features, including the ability to select and create personalized recommendation algorithms; however, it is unclear how many users actively employ these features (Bovet & Pierri, 2025). Regarding visibility, the user base of reform-oriented social media platforms is comparatively small (Newman et al., 2025). However, several news influencers have recently established a presence on Bluesky (Stocking et al., 2025). This suggests that the content on reform-oriented social media platforms might benefit not only from interoperability but also from heightened traditional media attention.

ALTERNATIVE NEWS ACROSS ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Several studies have shown that alternative social media platforms provide communication spaces for actors banned from mainstream social media platforms (Ali et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020). Alternative social media platforms also function as hosts for conspiracy theories (Mahl et al., 2024), extremism (Guhl & Davey, 2020; Schulze et al., 2022), and explicit hate speech (Rieger et al., 2021). However, the opportunity structures of alternative social media platforms vary depending on their self-positioning and governance, their business models, technical set-ups, and affordances. This also includes the opportunity structures for alternative news and its creators.

Due to their antagonistic self-positioning and “anti-governance” stance, social counter-media provide an attractive environment for

alternative counter news creators. In Western democracies, these platforms are currently often part of the far-right Alt-Tech ecosystem (e.g., Hohner et al., 2024a, 2024b; Johnson et al., 2022; Zannettou et al., 2018b). Thus, they are particularly attractive for right-wing alternative news creators and respective audiences (Peucker & Fisher, 2023).

Alternative news also plays a relevant role in conspiracy-theoretical fringe communities (e.g., Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2017). However, the peer-to-peer structures of fringe communities are less beneficial for creators' self-display. Instead, alternative news appears as links in these communities. Fringe communities do, however, offer a community for distrustful audiences such as alternative news users (Schwarzenegger, 2021).

Context-bound alternatives offer similar opportunities as more mainstream social media to alternative news creators; as such, their benefits heavily depend on the available audience on these platforms and whether the platforms' governance aligns with the respective alternative news. For example, Russian state-backed alternative news Sputnik and RT in European languages were heavily shared on the Russian platform VKontakte after these outlets had been banned in the European Union (Henriksen et al., 2024). As another example, while TikTok does not take a counter-hegemonic stance, the platform has been repeatedly criticised for tolerating far-right content creators (Hohner et al., 2024a, 2024b).

Finally, the current reform-oriented social media platforms tend to have a more progressive user base in Western democracies (Bovet & Pierri, 2025). They also host instances or spaces explicitly designed to protect marginalized communities. These platforms may therefore be especially relevant for alternative news targeted towards societal minorities, under-represented communities, and social movements. At the same time, distributed architectures place high responsibility on individual administrators; this can put substantial strains on smaller teams and instance owners (Zhang et al., 2024).

Taken together, a nuanced understanding of the new opportunity structures emerging for alternative news creators and their audiences in times of platformization requires a deeper look into the interplay between specific types of alternative news and the different categories of alternative social media platforms. However, such systematic comparative research remains scarce. For example, we lack systematic cross-country comparisons between Western and Eastern (social) media systems, between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and examinations of countries undergoing

political transitions. Cross-platform studies that extend alternative social media platforms beyond social counter-media and fringe communities are needed to understand how users choose between, for example, social counter-media and reform-oriented alternative social media platforms and to understand the long-term effects of engaging in such spaces, for example, on polarization (for initial data on alternative platforms, alternative news, and polarization, see Kristensen, 2025). Finally, little is known about how alternative news creators select the channels where to publish their content, nor do we fully understand the processes motivating users to engage, for example, with social counter-media as opposed to reform-oriented alternative social media platforms.

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Alternative, Citizen, or Amateur Media? Telegram Channels as News Sources in the Context of War

Nataliia Steblyna and Liubov Vasylyk

INTRODUCTION

“Another video of Russians fleeing—according to our military, one of them ran away barefoot.” “Russian paratroopers landing in Odesa”... “The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine refutes reports about a landing operation.” “Situation on tram No. 18: a man in a police uniform is drinking beer.” “The director of the Department of Education asks people not to bring food and supplies to School No. 40, as there are no hungry refugees from Kharkiv there. There’s nowhere to store the food—everyone is full, even the security guard.” “Another car accident—vehicle completely wrecked, casualties reported.” “A powerful explosion on the Crimean Bridge near Kerch. The Russians claim that a fuel tanker accidentally exploded. Our side remains mysteriously silent.”

N. Steblyna (✉)

Department of Journalism and Social Communication, Vasyl Stus Donetsk National University, Vinnytsia, Ukraine

e-mail: n.steblyna@donnu.edu.ua

L. Vasylyk

Department of Journalism, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Chernivtsi, Ukraine

These are examples of typical messages from anonymous Ukrainian Telegram news channels, which have become the most popular medium for news consumption since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. The news published by these media outlets are partially based on unverified reports from citizen journalists, while some posts do include references to official sources. At times, these channels spread misinformation in an attempt to inform their audience as quickly as possible; other times, they debunk false reports, helping to counter Russian information warfare. On days when a particular city or region suffers from Russian shelling or blackouts, Telegram channels shift their focus to these topics, and their posts may consist of a single word—"explosion"—or even profanity, expressing raw emotion in response to missile and drone attacks. On relatively calmer days, these media outlets share videos of incidents involving intoxicated locals, memes, and ironic commentary on car accidents or statements by municipal authorities. Perhaps such a mode of news reporting is not what a country needs when fighting for its survival against a vastly superior enemy. However, it is evident that this is exactly the kind of news the audience wants.

According to a study by Internews, only 20% of Ukrainians used Telegram in 2021 for news within the past 30 days. However, following the outbreak of war, the number of users in Ukraine tripled and has continued to grow, reaching 73% in 2024. Conversely, the popularity of professional media has declined (Censor.net, 2024). This corresponds with the global tendency to depend on social networks; however, Ukraine's reliance on social networks is much higher than in countries belonging to the so-called 'social-first club', where traditional media has lost the competition to digital platforms (the USA—34%, Brazil—35%) (Newman et al., 2024).

In Ukraine, the popularity of mainstream media has been declining since 2015, as has trust in the media (Internews, 2025). Main features of the Ukrainian media landscape were the political pressure from oligarchs (IREX, 2019) and a lack of media transparency. However, there was also 'considerable pluralism and open criticism of the government and investigation of powerful figures' (Freedom House, 2021).

In 2022, the media trust indicator increased to 57% due to the start of the full-scale war. However, it decreased significantly to 29% and 27% in 2023 and 2024 respectively (KIIS, 2024). The Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication concluded that, as the content of professional media became more controlled under martial law, audiences looked for

alternative opinions and perceived Telegram channels as such (UIMC, 2023). According to Internews research, Ukrainians ‘confirm the information they receive from the media and official sources by communicating directly with people who may have witnessed the events’ (Internews, 2023). Thus, news from traditional media outlets is seen as insufficient, and some believe it is impossible to report truthful information during war (Internews, 2022).

According to the Order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which was issued almost a week after the start of the full-scale invasion, media activity was regulated due to new wartime realities ‘to provide objective coverage of events, as well as to prevent the leakage of restricted information’ (Ministry of Defence, 2025). The accreditation process (it is now impossible to work in frontline territories without accreditation), as well as the communication protocol between military personnel and journalists, was tightened. Numerous journalists have had their accreditation revoked for violating the order.

Additionally, due to the war, occupation and economic difficulties, as well as the decision of some journalists to join the armed forces or become refugees, numerous professional media outlets, especially print media, have closed (Chernyavsky, 2024). Media outlets in occupied territories or frontline areas have mainly decided to relocate their offices. There have also been many cases of Russian attacks on media infrastructure, editorial offices, and journalists (IMI, 2024b).

In such circumstances, when the mainstream media face numerous obstacles, the popularity of Telegram channels, which produce news in a different way, mostly without numerous restrictions and with little adherence to journalistic culture, can help us understand their role as alternative media in extreme contexts such as war.

THE ROLE OF TELEGRAM IN THE MODERN DIGITAL MEDIA SYSTEM

Telegram is often described as an alternative media platform, in contrast to popular mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Rogers, 2020; Walther & McCoy, 2021). Due to Telegram’s “alternative” policies—which include a lack of moderation (Júnior et al., 2022), anonymity for users, and virtually no content restrictions (Willaert et al., 2022)—the platform has also been documented as a hub for conspiracy

theories (Hoseini et al., 2023), racism, brutality (Baumgartner et al., 2020), far-right ideology (Urman & Katz, 2020) and propaganda, including Kremlin-backed narratives (Ilyuk et al., 2022). With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Telegram became a platform for spreading distorted information about the war (Hanley & Durumeric, 2023). Thus, the absence of regulations has made Telegram particularly popular among those who have been deplatformed elsewhere for spreading harmful content, reinforcing its status as an alternative media space.

However, Telegram cannot be exclusively labelled as a "dark corner of the Internet" (Rogers, 2020). In some authoritarian regimes, it has played a positive role precisely because of its content production and distribution policies, for example during the 2020 Belarussian protest (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022; Slobozhan et al., 2023) and the Hong Kong protests (Urman et al., 2020; Chao et al., 2022).

TELEGRAM NEWS CHANNELS IN THE UKRAINIAN CONTEXT

Since 2019, anonymous political Telegram channels have also been gaining popularity in Ukraine, posting mostly compromising materials (Zhuhai & Kuznietsova, 2021). Interestingly, the emergence of these channels coincided with reforms in the Ukrainian professional media sector: media privatization, requiring government representatives to divest themselves of media ownership interests; transparency requirements, compelling professional media outlets to disclose their ownership structures. 2019 was also a presidential election year in Ukraine, which saw Volodymyr Zelensky come to power. His team publicly stated that they did not need professional media to interact with society (Lb.ua, 2019).

Consequently, while Ukraine's professional media sector was becoming more transparent, Telegram provided a platform for political figures who wanted to exert influence while remaining anonymous. Thus, the emergence of anonymous political Telegram channels in Ukraine in 2019 aligns with the broader global trend described earlier, whereby parts of the media generating an alternative agenda moved from the regulated to the unregulated space. This shift enabled certain channels to disseminate political manipulation, covert political advertising and propaganda.

However, alongside anonymous political channels, amateur news outlets also emerged on Telegram in Ukraine. These channels primarily published short informational updates and gained immense popularity during the full-scale invasion. According to Telegram statistics, the subscriber

count of many popular anonymous news channels on Telegram has multiplied several times since 24 February 2022.

Researchers studying these channels in Ukraine refer to them as ‘media without standards’ (IMI, 2024a). The Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication (UIMC, 2023), which conducted a review of Telegram news channels in the Ukrainian segment, described them as ‘non-institutionalized’, meaning they are ‘not created by the editorial teams of traditional or online media’. Regional Telegram news channels have also become the subject of study for the Pylyp Orlyk Institute of Democracy, where media experts distinguish between professional and amateur media, specifically anonymous Telegram channels that do not always adhere to journalistic rules and standards. Table 19.1 displays the most popular Telegram channels in Ukraine at the national and regional level. All of the channels are anonymous and do not disclose ownership, editors or authors.

Table 19.1 The most popular Telegram channels in Ukraine (category “News and Media”)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Slogan</i>	<i>Subscribers</i>	<i>Average reach/post</i>	<i>Content</i>
National level				
Truha Ukraina	Actual events in Ukraine	3.2 M	794 K	Ukrainian news, entertainment, covered political advertisement, commercial advertisement
Nikolaevskiy Vanyok	Here I write exclusively my opinion	2.7 M	845 K	War news, information about missile/drone attacks
Real war	News, news from the front, key ideas - we tell you about everything you need to know in Ukraine	1.5 M	370 K	Ukrainian news, war news, information about missile/drone attacks, covered political advertisement
Novyna UA	UKRAINE’S leading news and political channel!	1.2 M	144 K	Political news, information about missile/drone attacks, covered political advertisement
Ukraina Sejchas	News, politics, war, photos and videos. We are trustworthy	1.1 M	202 K	Ukrainian news, entertainment, covered political advertisement, commercial advertisement

(continued)

Table 19.1 (continued)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Slogan</i>	<i>Subscribers</i>	<i>Average reach/post</i>	<i>Content</i>
Regional level				
Odesa info	18+ the most important news of Odesa and the region. Only Odesa audience	908 K	300 K	Regional news, consequences of the war in the region, crime, entertainment, covered political advertisement, commercial advertisement
Sh.Dnipro	Shitty Dnipro is your guide to city life!	517 K		Regional news, consequences of the war in the region, crime, covered political advertisement
News Odesa	<i>No slogan</i>	489 K	120 K	Regional news, consequences of the war in the region, crime, covered political advertisement
Lvivych news	Lvivych—Telegram channel #1 in Lviv. Your best colleague. I know all the news	331 K	117 K	Regional news, consequences of the war in the region, crime, covered political advertisement
Sh.Kherson	Kherson news, Ukrainians trust us	327 K	87 K	Consequences of the war in the region, regional news, advertisement
Truha Dnipro	<i>No slogan</i>	327 K	94 K	Regional news, consequences of the war in the region, crime, covered political advertisement

TELEGRAM NEWS CHANNELS: RELATION TO PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND REGULATION

The relationship between the professional media community and Telegram news channels is notably tense. For example, professional journalists have expressed outrage at the accreditation of representatives of popular Telegram channels to events involving the President of Ukraine (IMI, 2024c). A Ukrainian data journalism outlet accused the country's most popular Telegram news channel, Truha, of launching an information attack following the publication of a journalistic investigation into its manipulative coverage of missile attacks (Rodak, 2023). Ukrainian professional media outlets have also exposed practices such as compromising text publications (Texty, 2025) and disseminating fake news and engaging in political manipulation (Dukach, 2022). The National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting, as a regulatory body, stated that it is important to monitor the activity of the channels as they may pose a risk to the Ukrainian informational space (Nrada, 2024). However, the government's attitude towards the most popular Telegram channels appears neutral or even positive; for instance, the Truha channel was honoured with a Certificate of Excellence for its work on the 'information front' (Tsyomyk & Govyna, 2023). Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Volodymyr Zelensky, acknowledged the importance of considering the influence, transparency and potential responsibility of Telegram channels (Gordon, 2023).

TELEGRAM NEWS CHANNELS: ALTERNATIVE, CITIZEN, OR AMATEUR MEDIA?

Ukrainian Telegram news channels periodically share content typically found in traditional news media. Popular channels reach millions of users, offering a diverse range of news and shaping mainstream discussions. Compared to mainstream media, they have the advantage of delivering news significantly faster, making them a critical source of real-time media. In the following section, we will evaluate the extent to which these channels fit the description of alternative media as defined in the research literature.

Alternative media "are on a smaller scale, more accessible and participatory, and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them"

(Coyer et al., 2007). Alternative media may emerge due to dissatisfaction with mainstream media (Müller & Schulz, 2019) and a desire to “counter the homogeneity and possibly declining diversity in the traditional press” (Buyens & van Aelst, 2021). Such media do not always adhere to journalistic culture (Freudenthaler, & Wessler, 2022), norms, or values (Buyens & van Aelst, 2021). They often have limited resources — for instance, to conduct investigations—and may therefore borrow some publications from mainstream outlets (Buyens & van Aelst, 2021). Nevertheless, they can exert significant influence on society and shape public opinion (Holt, 2018). They may cover both topics and individuals overlooked by mainstream media—those unwilling to tackle complex social issues, prompting alternative media to correct or supplement the information available in mainstream sources (Holt, 2018). In some cases, this “alternativeness”, especially when it comes to ignorance of the standard procedures of verifying information, may lead to the dissemination of ‘fake news’, the presence of coordinated disinformation campaigns, including the dominance of anti-globalist and anti-vaccine narratives, climate change denial, attacks on traditional media and democratic institutions worldwide, and even expressions of support for Russian government propaganda (Starbird, 2017).

In the contemporary hybrid media landscape, scholars stress that the distinctions between mainstream news media and alternative news media should be approached as a continuum rather than as to absolute categories. To discuss the extent to which Ukrainian Telegram news channels can be characterized as alternative media, we use the framework by Holt et al. (2019). As a first characteristic, Holt et al. (2019) stress that alternative news media must position themselves (or be positioned by others) in opposition to the mainstream media—aiming to counter, challenge or complete established media organizations.

From this point of departure, Holt et al. (2019) suggest that the differences and similarities of alternative vs. mainstream media can be studied through a set of key dimensions—ranging from the micro to the macro level of analysis. Starting with the micro-level, studies show that alternative media producers, are usually non-professionals such as citizens, activists, fans, or marginalized individuals. Also on the micro level, Holt et al. (2019) suggest analyzing alternative news content compared to mainstream news media content, such as news frames, sources, issues etc.

Moving on to the meso-level, analyzing the production and distribution processes of news media organizations can be a good starting point

(Holt et al., 2019). Regarding production processes, alternative media outlets are often characterized by flatter, non-hierarchical production structures. Regarding, distribution processes, alternative media are more prone to use social media to reach their users and bypass traditional barriers of distribution. On the macro level, Holt et al. (2019) suggest assessing to what extent alternative media outlets position themselves outside or in the periphery of the media system, for instance whether they seek to be part of the journalistic institution by seeking to be part of professional associations, ethical codes, funding systems or media self-regulation.

Freudenthaler & Wessler (2022) distinguish between mainstream-like, partisan, or activist alternative media. The first type may feature content similar to that of mainstream media but is considered alternative because it positions itself as correcting the shortcomings of mainstream media in addressing certain issues, is non-commercial, and is created by a specific community. The second type includes media that cater to the “polarized fringes of the political spectrum” or promote ultra-right or ultra-left agendas. The third type encompasses media used by activists to achieve specific goals (Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2022).

To understand how Ukrainian news Telegram channels inform their audiences during the war and whether they align with the above description of alternative media, we will draw on the findings of monitoring efforts conducted by the Pylyp Orlyk Institute of Democracy. These efforts examined regional Telegram channels in three regions of Ukraine (East, South, and West). In total, the institute’s experts analysed 24 Telegram channels and over 9000 posts (IDPO, 2024). The evaluation focused on adherence to professional standards, the presence of manipulation, propaganda, and hidden advertising, as well as the themes and tone of the texts.

It cannot be said that Telegram channels completely disregard professional standards, but their overall rating for this indicator is lower (7.5–7.6 out of a maximum of 12) compared to professional media (9.5).

The top themes of these outlets were war, crime, and local community life. This thematic distribution generally aligned with that of regional online publications. However, Telegram channels differed significantly from professional media in terms of tone: 20–25% of posts had a negative tone, 8–10% a positive one, whereas professional online media were more neutral, with only 6–7% of posts carrying either positive or negative connotations.

Now, let us compare the characteristics of alternative media with the findings from the monitoring of Telegram channel content (see Table 19.2). Applying the distinction between alternative and mainstream media proposed by Kristoffer Holt et al. (2019) to Ukrainian Telegram channels reveals certain specifics at several levels. The content producers do not define themselves as journalists, and some channels partly rely on

Table 19.2 Ukrainian regional news Telegram channels as alternative media

<i>Alternative Media</i>	<i>Ukrainian Regional Telegram Channels</i>
Position themselves “as self-perceived corrective” of mainstream media	No, according to the channels’ self-perception, they often describe themselves as “the leading”, “the best” or “trustworthy” channels, where all important news is collected. There are no mentions about being an alternative to mainstream media
Micro level	
Alternative voices/ creators	Yes, although the channels categorize themselves as “news and media”. The citizen journalists who produce content for the channels always remain anonymous, so anonymity can be understood as a defining characteristic of these media. This distinguishes telegram channels from professional media outlets. Only a few channels are transparent about their owners, who are not journalists.
Alternative narratives, sources, interpretations, and ideas	Yes and no; content is generally similar to regional online media; a distinction from mainstream media may lie in relying on content from citizen journalists.
Produce content for a specific community	No, content is aimed at a mass audience.
Meso level	
Break with established journalistic culture, norms, and values	Yes, particularly regarding information verification, adherence to standards of balanced opinions, completeness, and neutrality
More accessible and participatory	Yes, due to telegram’s user-friendly interface and encouragement of comments and reactions
Organizational independence	Difficult to assess due to the anonymity of the channels; owners are not disclosed.
Less constrained by commercial interests	No, as they publish advertisements and pay for content submitted by citizen journalists
Macro level	
Relation to the established journalistic field	Yes, the most popular channels haven’t legally registered as media and the channels’ creators are neither by researchers, nor by professional journalists perceived as a part of the Ukrainian media sphere

content produced by citizen journalists. However, in this case, we cannot speak of declarations where the authors of the channels oppose themselves to media professionals. Journalism is just not mentioned in the channels' slogans. As for alternative content, the channels only produce it partly: there are reprints from official sources, and the information isn't reframed by the authors—they mainly just shorten or simplify texts. Citizen journalism content coexists with official sources, and the thematic priorities may align with those of mainstream media. The production processes differ from professional ones; however, it is impossible to say that Telegram authors ignore all standards. For distribution, they use traditional social network options such as reposts, links, advertisements, and recommendations. Additionally, some channels have Facebook or Instagram pages. For example, Nikolaevskiy Vanyok has a Facebook page with 89 thousand subscribers. The admin publishes photos and one- or two-sentence news items but doesn't include notifications about missiles or drones. *Odessa Info* has an Instagram page with 240 thousand subscribers, as well as a Viber messenger channel. *Truha, Ukraina Sejchas* and *Realnaya Voina* had Facebook pages at the beginning of the invasion; these pages are no longer active.

At the media system level, it is possible to see differences, as professional Ukrainian journalists do not recognize the most popular Telegram channels as professional journalistic outlets. There have only been discussions about implementing legislative or other regulations for them, as journalists and media experts stress that Telegram channels should operate within legal and ethical frameworks. However, there have been no noticeable movements in this direction yet. The channels remain anonymous and unregulated and thus exist outside the media policy designed for professional journalism. In summary, the characteristics of Telegram channels mostly coincide with the proposed definition at each level.

However, it is also important to consider some specifics that cannot be explained within this paradigm.

TELEGRAM NEWS CHANNELS AS AMATEUR MEDIA

So, can we classify anonymous Telegram news channels as alternative media? Yes, but only partially. These channels position themselves as media but are unwilling to operate within the professional media space, adhering to its rules and taking responsibility for the content they disseminate. As long as these media do not adhere to professional standards and remain

unregulated, they cannot be considered professional. Nor can they be categorized solely as “citizen journalism,” since, while such content is a priority, Telegram channels also include official information. However, taking Holt et al.’s definition (2019) into account, the main obstacle here is the channels’ self-perception: there are no declarations of being alternative in the modern Ukrainian media system. Ukrainian journalists and media researchers do not include Telegram channels in the professional media sphere, but the channels just do not seem to care. While there are some conflicts between particular channels and journalistic outlets, these conflicts are not extrapolated to the extent that the channels view the professional media sphere as ‘fake news mainstream media’ or ‘enemies of the people’ who constantly distort the truth. Additionally, although the Telegram channels produce news differently, it is still not possible to differentiate them completely from mainstream media or tear them off the mainstream agenda.

Thus, when discussing this case, we should also recognize that the relationship between alternative and mainstream media can be a dynamic one. Discourses and boundaries can change, and as Holt et al. (2019) said, alternative media can become mainstream. After analyzing the role of the most popular Telegram channels, we can conclude that they are an important part of the modern Ukrainian media system. Journalists and researchers do not agree on their media status, but the audience prefers the channels’ content. This is why it is problematic to speak about them as alternative media in the traditional sense, as such media do not work with a mass audience and try to exclude themselves from the professional journalistic sphere. Therefore, bearing in mind the flexible and unpredictable nature of the modern digital environment and its potential for producing and disseminating content, should we broaden our understanding of alternative media? In our case, declarations about the mission of some ‘alternative’ media and the perception of clear differences from the mainstream are not important. It seems that the Telegram channels simply do not care about their place or their role. They just do their job differently, and in some cases, they even appear to have fun reporting on life during the war.

We therefore propose to consider another dimension of alternative media: amateurism. For an amateur reporter, perception is not important; the amateur does not have a mission to correct the mainstream media or provide their audience with alternative voices, narratives, contexts, or interpretations. The amateur does not follow professional standards because they may never have heard of them, not because they consider journalistic norms to be harmful to truth discovery. However, the modern

digital environment, and Telegram in particular, provides amateurs with powerful tools for creating and disseminating content. In Ukraine today, where people are suffering because of the war, they want to see that they are not alone. They get photos and videos produced by amateurs who can't do their job professionally, but who have something more important: experience of coping with the war.

Amateurism has always been present in definitions of alternative media; however, it has not been at the forefront of these definitions. Mostly, attempts to distinguish alternative media were made on the axis 'mainstream – alternative'. However, in our case, we should add another axis: 'professional – amateur'.

This 'amateur' label could also serve as a warning to consumers: yes, the news on these anonymous Telegram-channels will be fast, concise, and attractively packaged, but no one will bear responsibility for it, making it easy to encounter incomplete, biased information, or even fakes, propaganda, and manipulations. Furthermore, this definition resonates with Andrew Keen's (2007) concept of the cult of the amateur: this cult undermines the values and culture developed over centuries within professional environments, celebrating creativity, freedom, and an unrestricted desire—unburdened by rules or considerations of responsibility—for ordinary audiences to say whatever comes to mind. The Ukrainian case brings amateurism back into discussions about modern digitalised media systems, alternative and mainstream media, and helps us to see that amateurs can be more powerful and influential than professionals. However, amateur and professional or mainstream media remain inextricably linked, as mainstream media content remains an important part and reference point of the reporting.

Is the same true of the context of war? Is war essential for this phenomenon to function? Since the rapid increase in popularity of Telegram news channels corresponded with the beginning of the full-scale invasion, arguably so. Therefore, the news consumption behaviour of consumers will likely also change after the war. Considering Ukraine's fight for European integration and European values in this war, similar approaches to the regulation of Telegram as a 'very large online platform', as mentioned in the EU Digital Services Act, may be proposed¹ (see also Chap. 18). Maybe

¹According to the Digital Services Act (DSA), "very large online platforms" (VLOPs) provide services to at least 45 million active monthly users. Telegram has not yet been included in this category, as it has a smaller audience. However, given the steady growth of Telegram's user base within the EU, it may soon qualify as a VLOP.

the amateur media will also need to consider norms, responsibility and, consequently, professionalism. Perhaps it is this professionalism that will help them improve their activities and rebuild Ukraine after the war.

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Mapping the Margins: Building a Cross-National Observatory for Alternative News Media Research

Frederik Weber Henriksen

INTRODUCTION

Alternative news media (ANM) research is a rapidly evolving interdisciplinary field at the intersection of political communication, media studies, and journalism. Its epistemic goals and methodological approaches remain open to development, shaped by shifting media ecosystems and ongoing debate about what constitutes “alternative” or “mainstream”. Much of the foundational work in the field has relied on qualitative case studies, which have provided crucial insights into the stylistic, argumentative, and ideological dimensions of ANM content (see e.g. Brems, 2023; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Frischlich et al., 2020; Hamелеers, 2025; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2024). This body of work has been crucial in establishing ANM research as a field by revealing how alternative media outlets shape media and political discourse by challenging mainstream media logics.

F. W. Henriksen (✉)

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University,
Roskilde, Denmark
e-mail: frmohe@ruc.dk

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E. Mayerhöffer et al. (eds.), *Alternative Media in European
Contexts*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-22489-7_20

Yet as the field matures, the limits of case-based, single-country studies become more apparent—particularly in addressing the transnational, networked nature of digital ANM ecosystems. To advance ANM research within the broader landscape of communication and media studies, there is a need for comparative studies that draw on computational and quantitative methods, which are, however, rare in existing research—with few notable exceptions (Henriksen et al., 2024, 2026; Kristensen et al., 2023; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024; Staender et al., 2024). These types of studies can reveal recurring patterns and important divergences across national media systems, political cultures, and regulatory environments (see also Chap. 16 in this volume). For instance, comparative designs can help determine whether key features—such as partisan or conspiratorial framing—are best explained by global information dynamics or by local historical trajectories.

Moreover, the field lacks unified frameworks for systematically mapping actors, narratives, and issues—such as migration or climate policy—across multiple ANM contexts. To address this gap, we need infrastructures that support scalable, cross-border analyses while maintaining interpretive depth. One such proposal is the development of an observatory model: a digital platform for collecting, analyzing, and visualizing ANM content that supports both distant, data-driven comparisons and close, qualitative interpretation. Inspired by the “distant reading” approach (Moretti, 2013), the observatory model adopts a “distant data” perspective: it favours systemic over textual analysis, treats abstraction as a productive constraint, and foregrounds the full archival field of alternative media—enabling researchers to detect emergent patterns and comparative structures that case studies of prominent ANM cannot yield.

In response to this need, this chapter introduces the *Alternative Media Observatory*—an open, interactive platform for researchers, students, and journalists to explore and engage with ANM content across national contexts. By integrating qualitative, quantitative, and computationally oriented methods (including NLP, topic modelling, and network analysis), the observatory provides a flexible, scalable infrastructure that offers a synchronized cross-national overview and enables topic- and actor-centred mapping through systematic tagging, computational text analysis, and dynamic visualizations. It supports hypothesis generation by coupling automated insights with sampling of texts for close qualitative reading, thereby seeking to advance ANM research for the investigation of

alternative news discourse and opinion dynamics in a longitudinal and transnational perspective.

Designed to bridge the deep insights of qualitative inquiry with the scale and reproducibility of computational approaches, the observatory remains accessible even to users with limited programming experience. To illustrate this in practice, the chapter presents a concrete implementation case, based on ANM from four Northern European countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). This also includes a discussion of the ethical dimensions that arise when collecting, analyzing, and publishing politically sensitive material produced by actors who may oppose scrutiny, resist categorisation, or strategically obscure their public-facing roles. The chapter emphasises the importance of responsible data collection, transparent methodological choices, and reflexive interpretation—especially when dealing with content that may simultaneously contribute to valid societal critique and delegitimization of democratic institutions.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: ‘DISTANT’ DATA?

Alternative news media can be defined broadly as media outlets that explicitly position themselves in opposition or as alternatives to mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019). These media differ significantly from legacy media in terms of ideological positioning, journalistic practices, and often in the dissemination of political content, including populist messaging, conspiracy narratives, or disinformation (Mayerhöffer, 2021; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Waisbord, 2022). As they often occupy critical spaces in public discourse, they thereby offer scholars crucial insights into broader societal and political dynamics on the fringes. As such, the alternative media observatory allows for the investigation of alternative or fringe agenda and opinion dynamics. As a digital platform designed to provide systematic, accessible, and comparable data about ANM across different national contexts, it is situated amongst computational explorations using data-driven methods to academic and professional fields associated with social sciences and humanities (Willaert et al., 2020, p. 2). As such, the observatory draws on previous scientific experiments with large corpora of text data (e.g., the Google Books corpus), as well as methods such as “distant reading” and “culturomics” aiming at extracting patterns from big textual data (Michel et al., 2011; Moretti, 2013).

The choice of the term “observatory” signals an infrastructure intended not merely as a passive data repository but rather as an active, interactive

tool that allows researchers to observe, detect, and interpret patterns and changes in media content dynamically. The observatory does not resemble the more classic astronomical observatory that processes a constant, stable flow of data on natural objects (e.g., radiation) (Rogers, 2018). Unlike traditional databases or archives, the observatory invites continuous exploration and comparative interpretation, bridging qualitative, quantitative, and computational methodologies. Instead, the media observatory offers a way to capture emergent properties of societal and cultural phenomena on the fringes of society (Willaert et al., 2020).

As such, the approach steps away from a focus on ‘big data’, which—and even more in the era of ‘large’ language models—seems like a vague way to describe epistemological approaches to digital phenomena. Instead, the observatory bases itself on the notion of ‘distant data’, thereby acknowledging the mediated character and scale of the data. Working with distant data is not about replicating close reading at scale—as implied by traditional distant reading approaches, which focus primarily on broad textual patterns—but rather about accepting abstraction as a productive methodological constraint. Unlike ‘big data’, which emphasizes sheer data volume and computational capacity, distant data specifically foregrounds the mediated and constructed nature of data collection, deliberately embracing abstraction to enable meaningful comparison of alternative media landscapes across languages, outlets, and national contexts. The observatory thus offers a balanced middle-ground between fully automated computational analysis and qualitative research approaches. While qualitative analysis excels in detailed explorations of style, rhetoric, and meaning, its scalability can be limited (Chen et al., 2017). Computational approaches, on the other hand, excel in scalability and replicability but often at the cost of interpretive depth and contextual nuance (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). The observatory conceptually seeks to integrate the interpretive strengths of qualitative methods with computational and quantitative scalability, supporting iterative exploration and hypothesis generation.

The ‘distant data’ approach seeking to span qualitative and computational methods is not without challenges. As Törnberg and Uitermark (2021) show, many strands of computational social science implicitly commit what Bhaskar (2013) calls the “epistemic fallacy,” treating abstracted data models as if they were unfiltered windows onto social reality. Any model of a social system—in this case based on alternative media content—is necessarily a simplification—and, in critical-realist terms, an ontologically partial one that no accumulation of empirical detail can fully

overcome (Hayles, 2010). To navigate this, the Alternative Media Observatory adopts a posture of critical methodological pluralism (Danermark et al., 2005): rather than pitting quantitative against qualitative, or computational against interpretive, it deliberately combines them while considering their respective ontological assumptions (Zachariadis et al., 2013). Quantitative outputs—topic models, network metrics, or time-series trends—are never endpoints but should be seen as invitations to qualitative interrogation (Giglietto et al., 2012). Conversely, ethnographic readings and close textual analyses gain scale and comparative leverage when anchored in systematic data collection across outlets and languages.

This pluralist stance treats NLP pipelines, geospatial mappings, and in-depth interviews not as competing validation tools, but as complementary ways of representing different phenomena. For instance, a topic model might surface a surge in climate-related framing on a Danish fringe site; a follow-up qualitative reading of sampled articles then uncovers the rhetorical strategies that automated labels alone would obscure.

By foregrounding the ontological limits of each method and weaving them into an integrated workflow, the observatory embraces a complexity-informed sensibility: it does not assume deterministic ‘clockwork lines’ data patterns in the alternative media ecosystem but contingent, emergent patterns that invite ongoing exploration and hypothesis generation. In this way, the platform offers not just data—and not just stories—but a flexible, reflexive infrastructure for understanding alternative news media in all their messiness and dynamism. As such, the aim is not to provide robust analytical endpoints, which is untenable without theory-driven progress, but descriptive and initial analytical starting points.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: OUTLET SELECTION AND SAMPLING

While the observatory approach is theoretically applicable to a broad range of alternative media types, the specific selection of outlets for any given implementation requires careful consideration of multiple factors.

First, the observatory must distinguish between the *types* of alternative media that are conceptually suitable for such analysis versus the *specific outlets* chosen for practical implementation. Building on operational definitions of alternative news media proposed by Holt et al. (2019) and Heft

et al. (2020), the Nordic Alternative Media Observatory presented here is e.g. based on sampled born-digital alternative media that maintain relatively stable web infrastructures, publish content regularly, and operate with some degree of editorial consistency. These media define themselves in opposition to the perceived societal mainstream from either a traditional partisan (left-wing or right-wing) or a cross-partisan, anti-systemic positioning. These criteria exclude certain forms of alternative media such as ephemeral social media accounts, party-affiliated media, or offline-only publications that may be equally important to understand alternative media ecosystems but require different methodological approaches.

The selection process must also consider the sensitivity of the observatory approach to extreme outliers. Some alternative media outlets may publish at dramatically different frequencies or maintain distinct editorial profiles that could skew aggregate analyses. For instance, a single high-volume outlet might dominate temporal trends or topic distributions, potentially obscuring patterns from smaller but equally significant outlets. To mitigate this, the observatory design should include disaggregation capabilities, allowing users to filter by individual outlets or outlet categories, and to examine data both with and without potential outliers. Additionally, the selection must account for potential biases in scraping accessibility. If the sampling procedures do not account for how web content is often *volatile* (i.e., subject to change), *personalized* (i.e., presented in response to request characteristics), and *unindexed* (i.e., not discoverable in public search indices or rendered only via dynamic scripts), considerable sampling bias can be introduced (Foerderer, 2023). Certain types of alternative media may be more likely to implement technical barriers to scraping, such as sophisticated bot detection or dynamic content loading. This could introduce systematic biases where more technically sophisticated or well-resourced outlets are underrepresented in the dataset. Researchers must be transparent about these limitations and consider how they might affect the representativeness of their findings.

Many alternative media outlets blur the boundaries between news and opinion, making the distinction between different content types both methodologically and theoretically significant. A news-only scope yields cleaner categories but risks missing politically salient discourse embedded in commentary, opinion pieces or features. A more inclusive approach that captures all published content might better reflect the actual discursive practices of alternative media, while a more selective approach might provide cleaner analytical categories. The observatory should support

disaggregation by content type, allowing researchers to examine news, opinion, and other content categories separately or in combination. This flexibility enables researchers to test hypotheses about how different types of content contribute to overall discursive patterns and to make informed decisions about which materials are most relevant to their specific research questions.

THE NORDIC PILOT: MAPPING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA LANDSCAPES ACROSS THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

The Alternative Media Observatory specifically focuses on ANM landscapes in a cross-national context. As argued for in Chaps. 15 and 16, a key factor in cross-national comparative research relates to how national contexts shape journalism—especially in times of digitization and broader economic, societal, and cultural shifts (Hanusch, 2019). An alternative journalistic landscape in a country is neither fixed nor a homogenous entity (Maares & Hanusch, 2023). This idea is rooted in media systems theory concerned with the roles of institutionalized journalism in different national settings (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

For this chapter, the ongoing work of a pilot Nordic observatory focusing on ANM content in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden will be used to explain the different steps of observatory building. As such, the Nordic observatory follows other studies on ANM content by comparing the output of different alternative media outlets in a cross-national setting (Heft et al., 2024; Kaiser et al., 2020; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022; Staender et al., 2024) rather than comparing ANM content against mainstream news media content. These countries share certain socio-political traits—relatively stable democratic structures and high-trust media landscapes—yet differ in media regulation, political culture, and historical trajectories of alternative media emergence. This selection promises to facilitate insightful comparative analyses, shedding light on how national contexts influence alternative media's discursive strategies, topical agendas, and ideological orientations.

Data Collection

Most ANM outlets do not put content behind paywalls, which is why their content is often manageable to scrape. However, a programming setup is still required to crawl URLs from main sites, ensure that the content is permissible to collect, as well as data cleaning and standardisation. The *first* step involves creating a seed list with the main URL to each of the different outlets based on the sampling of ANM as discussed above. The Nordic observatory focuses exclusively on digital ANM with a clear anti-mainstream leaning (see Kristensen et al., 2023 for elaboration).

The *second* step consists in extracting links to all articles based on the folder structure on each news site. News outlets typically organize their web content using a hierarchical structure that includes subfolders corresponding to categories such as politics, culture, or economy (e.g., /politics/, /opinion/, /world/). These subfolders are often reflected in the site's sitemap—an XML file that lists all discoverable URLs on a website in a structured format. This step also involves ensuring that the scraping procedure is within the terms of service (ToS) of each outlet typically by checking the so-called robots.txt. This file is a simple text file hosted at the root of a domain that informs automated agents (e.g., search engine crawlers or research scrapers) about which parts of a site may or may not be accessed. Although not legally binding, these files represent a widely accepted standard for ethical data collection. More broadly, responsible digital scholarship requires balancing the scientific value of data collection with respect for platform autonomy, data minimization principles, and the avoidance of server overload. Researchers should document their scraping practices, ensure their data usage aligns with institutional ethical guidelines, and, where appropriate, seek permission from outlet administrators when uncertainty arises (Brown et al., 2024). In the *third* and final step, sub-page lists are cleaned to exclude non-article content.

Articles were scraped using Trafilatura (Barbaresi, 2021), a library optimized for large-scale text and metadata extraction. The scraper was implemented as a modular Python script with rate limiting, error handling, and rotating IPs to ensure stable and compliant collection. Unreachable pages were excluded after repeated failed attempts, and long-running jobs were managed via persistent server sessions. Trafilatura's built-in content extraction pipeline removes boilerplate, navigation elements, and other non-article artifacts so no extensive content cleaning is needed.

Analytical Approach to ANM Content

The corpus comprises 953,846 articles published between January 2005 and September 2025 from 67 different alternative news media outlets in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden that were at least partly active in this period and still active in 2025. To ensure data validity and quality, a systematic validation procedure was conducted. This involved randomly sampling a small set of diverse articles (opinion pieces, news, advertisements) from each outlet and manually verifying the retrieved content and publication dates. Each outlet was given a profile of its political orientation, combining desk research (e.g., self-descriptions in “about us” sections) with interim coding of a stratified sample of articles across key issues (e.g. migration, climate, gender).

The first analytical step consists of applying descriptive statistical methods to establish baseline differences and structural features. Descriptive approaches—counts, temporal trends, and distributional summaries—are crucial for generating an initial overview and identifying outliers, gaps, and shifts over time.

These patterns offer contextual grounding for more advanced computational methods such as network analysis or topic modelling, which benefit from a clear sense of volume, frequency, and source concentration. This layered approach supports hypothesis formation, comparative insights and iterative exploration.

Table 20.1 shows the overall distribution of articles and reveals strong national variation in outlet productivity. Denmark, Finland, and Norway show a “centralized” content production with a single outlet—180grader.dk, mvlehti.net <http://mvlehti.net>, and document.no—accounting for nearly half of the total articles per country. Sweden shows a more decentralized spread among top outlets like *Tidningen Syre*, *Nya Dagbladet* or *Bulletin*, suggesting a more diversified ANM landscape. Although descriptive, these findings indicate underlying structural differences worth investigating in a comparative perspective. These descriptive distributions make structural asymmetries visible (e.g. concentration vs diversification) that can inform comparative case selection or frame later qualitative inquiry into national media ecologies.

Figure 20.1 complements this picture with a longitudinal view. Denmark’s ANM landscape surged around 2010 and remained relatively stable afterward, with minor fluctuations. Finland’s growth trajectory is more gradual, gaining momentum after 2015 but maintaining

Table 20.1 Top 6 media outlets and average number of articles per active year across the four countries (2005–25)

<i>Denmark</i>				<i>Finland</i>			
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Avg. year</i>	<i>Domain</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Avg. year</i>
180grader	Right	124,247	6539	Mv lehti	Right	59,599	4966
24nyt	Right	55,316	6146	Uvmedia	Right	10,548	1318
Piopio	Left	40,680	2404	Pt-media	Other	8227	1028
Den korte avis	Right	28,482	2034	Kansalainen	Right	7954	530
Document DK	Right	22,282	2025	Magneettimedia	Other	4184	209
Arbejderen	Left	12,524	1789	Verkkosanomat	Right	1226	477
Norway				Sweden			
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Avg. year</i>	<i>Domain</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Avg. year</i>
Document	Right	136,786	6406	Tidningen Syre	Left	54,186	3870
Inyheter	Right	28,647	5729	Nya Dagbladet	Other	35,233	2516
Frihedskamp	Right	20,024	1252	Bulletin	Right	34,450	5741
Rights	Right	15,781	749	Samnytt	Right	30,136	3348
Herland	Right	7552	580	Nyheter Idag	Right	17,763	1366
report							
Radikalpolitikk	Left	4245	326	Nya tider	Right	17,207	1229

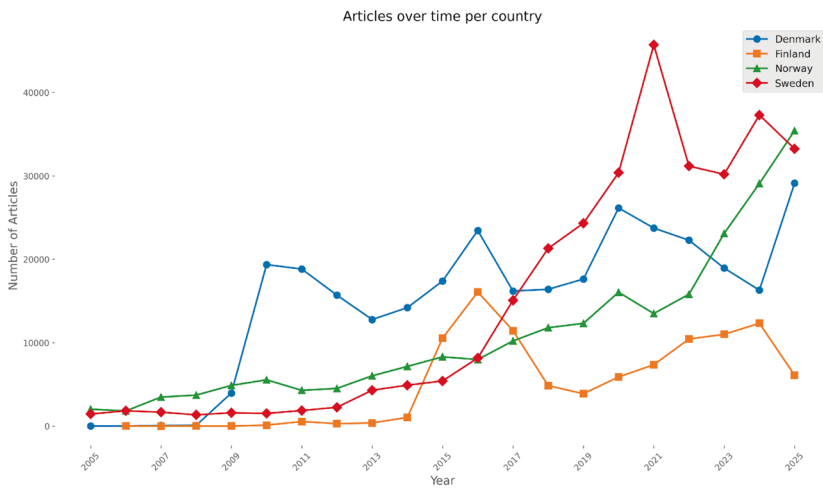


Fig. 20.1 Alternative news media articles over time per country (n=953,846 articles, 2005–2025)

consistently lower output. Norway shows a steady, gradual growth trajectory without notable peaks. Sweden shows sustained growth starting around 2015, peaking sharply in 2021, before declining again in 2022. These patterns suggest distinct national dynamics in the development of alternative media ecosystems. Taken together, such longitudinal patterns provide a comparative backdrop and invite questions about how political or regulatory shifts might relate to surges or declines in content, which can be probed further through, for example, content analysis (qualitative or quantitative) of periods where certain countries show patterns of interest.

For more advanced analysis, this chapter focuses specifically on domain co-occurrences in article content using network analysis, as illustrated in Fig. 20.2 (see also Chap. 14 in this volume), and overarching topical themes derived from topic modelling of article leads, depicted in Fig. 20.3 (see also Chap. 13 in this volume). These approaches demonstrate practical examples of leveraging ANM content within observatory construction. While network analysis of domains and topic modelling of content are highlighted here for illustrative purposes, the full Nordic Observatory includes additional analytical techniques and visualizations.

In analysing the interconnections between Nordic ANM outlets, a directed network based on the hyperlinked sources (domains) extracted from the articles is constructed (Fig. 20.2)¹. Network nodes represent domains and edges represent hyperlink references between domains. The visualisation reveals distinct clusters of source types, such as scientific sources, mainstream news media, social media sources, as well as the position of the individual ANM outlets with regard to these sources. It is worth highlighting how social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter/X (via t.co links), and Facebook is highly used in ANM content.

While Fig. 20.2 serves primarily as an illustration, the emerging clusters could form the basis for further inquiry. For example, one could investigate the composition of each cluster with attention to the mix of mainstream, social media, and other ANM sources, thereby building typologies of citation/source practices (see also Heft et al., 2024; Mayerhöffer and Heft, 2022). Such an approach would also enable targeted qualitative

¹ The network visualisation uses a force-directed layout (Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm with $k=0.3$) to position nodes, with node sizes scaled by degree centrality. The analysis was conducted using NetworkX, and the network data was explored using Gephi.

ETHICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main ethical considerations of constructing a cross-national observatory of ANM content relate to the automated scraping of news articles. The Observatory deals with public-yet-contentious discourse, often created by actors who either explicitly reject mainstream visibility or weaponize visibility to propagate their own agendas. As Brown et al. (2024) emphasize, scraping for research should not be seen as an ethically neutral technical practice, but rather as a methodologically embedded and normatively consequential practice that intersects with evolving legal, institutional, and epistemological concerns. Although all ANM sites in our dataset are publicly accessible and lack login walls or paywalls, their content is politically charged, and some outlets frame themselves as adversarial to media, academic, or governmental institutions, thereby fostering anti-systemic counterpublicity (Henriksen, 2024).

Brown et al. (2024) argue that the key ethical challenge lies not merely in whether content is public, but in whether its collection and reuse respect contextual integrity—that is, the norms governing information flow within its original setting, e.g. terms of services (Nissenbaum, 2009; Zimmer, 2018). However, Brown et al. (2024) caution that even technically permissible scraping should not bypass broader ethical review. Here, a central consideration regards whether the subjects (editors) expect their actions (publishing) may be observed by researchers, which can be justified given the increasing focus on ANM as a research field. One way to mitigate this is to submit the protocol to an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Yet, as noted in the AoIR guidelines (Franzke et al., 2020), IRB approval alone is not sufficient for ethical assurance in digital trace research. Researchers must also reflect on how their own position, tools, and assumptions shape their knowledge production. For researchers engaging in scraping for the first time, colleagues can also be a resource for understanding and assessing the ethical dimensions in the environment, alongside navigating the specific actors who are involved in institutionalizing the considerations discussed above (Brown et al., 2024, p. 20).

Another ethical layer involves the politics of inclusion: which ANM outlets are indexed, which are excluded, and on what grounds. Drawing on existing conceptual definitions and previous research can be considered best practice here but filters the landscape through existing scholarly criteria that may obscure other relevant or emergent actors. Moreover,

decisions about what counts as ‘alternative’ are not neutral and are influenced by normative perspectives (see Chaps. 2, 3, and 4 in this volume). In privileging easily scrapable, text-based material and certain structural features (site stability, HTML accessibility), we exclude other sources of alternative information. As such, any scraping-based corpus reflects a ‘construct’ shaped by technical, normative, and institutional filters rather than a ‘total’ view of data.

Another point relates to how scraping inevitably entails data reduction: articles become tokens, topics, or graphs. While such abstractions support cross-national comparison, they risk flattening the rich discursive, rhetorical, and ideological complexity of ANM content. The Observatory addresses this through a hybrid methodological posture: quantitative outputs (e.g., topic distributions) are presented as prompts for qualitative interrogation—not endpoints.

CONCLUSION

The Alternative Media Observatory offers an infrastructural and methodological advancement, responding directly to the predominance of single-country studies and the absence of scalable comparative frameworks within ANM research. By integrating computational, quantitative, and qualitative methods into a unified platform, the Observatory does not merely map macro-level trends or document micro-level interpretive textures—it explicitly facilitates hypothesis generation and comparative analyses across diverse national contexts.

This chapter has demonstrated concretely how the Observatory operationalizes these ambitions through a pilot implementation in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The dataset is generated via transparent and replicable scraping of ANM articles and enables analysis through multilingual embeddings, clustering, and topic modelling, thus revealing discursive structures and cross-national patterns invisible in traditional content analyses. Importantly, these findings represent starting points rather than endpoints; the visualizations and data representations explicitly serve as prompts for hypothesis-driven comparative inquiry.

By embedding transparency, methodological documentation, and interactive exploration at its core, the Observatory speaks to broader epistemological calls for interpretability, accountability, and reproducibility in computational media research (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). Moreover, the Observatory explicitly invites

researchers to generate and test comparative hypotheses through its visualizations and interface, moving beyond merely descriptive mapping to actively shaping the research agenda within ANM studies. Ultimately, the Observatory strives to be more than a technical platform—it represents a conceptual shift toward reflexive, methodologically pluralist infrastructures capable of supporting sustained comparative research. By doing so, it provides a blueprint for more comprehensive, nuanced, and systematically comparative approaches to alternative news media research.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Andreas Birkbak for witful comments on the concept of an observatory. This work was supported by the Carlsberg Foundation [grant number CF20-0247].

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