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Understanding Alternative News Media and Its Contribution to Diversity

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue *Contesting the Mainstream: Understanding Alternative News Media*, we discuss how and to what extent alternative news media contribute to news diversity. We elaborate on the concept of diversity, the democratic role of media, and the normative implications of alternative media in the wider media sphere. Based on the articles published in this special issue, that offer new and revealing empirical insights into a wide range of alternative media sites and their practices, from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North America, and Latin America, we argue that it becomes increasingly clear that awareness about normative positions within alternative media research is imperative. This is because an appreciation of the normative purpose of alternative media guides our ability to understand their role in society. The necessity for thinking through such positions is particularly exemplified by the most radical alternative media actors, and how they are debated and studied in different political systems.

KEYWORDS

Alternative media; diversity; pluralism; democracy; news; boundaries

In the opening chapter of his seminal book, *Alternative media* (2002), Chris Atton asks: do alternative media still exist? And, if they do, how should we understand and study them? Having invited scholars to contribute to this special issue, *Contesting the Mainstream: Understanding Alternative News Media*, in our view the answer to the first question is a resounding yes. But the answer to the second question remains highly challenging. Our ambition as editors of this special issue has been to identify how we can improve the study of alternative media. We have encouraged scholars to examine alternative media broadly, enhancing our knowledge and understanding of non-, pseudo- and semi-professional news, including the producers pursuing different ideological goals, and how the “alternativeness” of alternative media is expressed in

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different political and cultural contexts (Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2021). As emphasized in the commentary by Silvio Waisbord (2022, in this issue), de-centring and de-westernizing alternative media studies continues to be an urgent matter. We are proud to say that the contributions to this special issue offer new and revealing empirical insights into a wide range and diversity of alternative media sites and their practices from Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Sweden, UK), Asia (India), the Middle East (Egypt and Turkey), North America (the US) and Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela).

In this introduction we approach alternative news media relationally, defining alternative media as a “proclaimed and/or (self)-proclaimed corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Inherent in this definition is a critique of the mainstream media, which can be expressed implicitly or explicitly, moderately or aggressively, randomly or systematically, and be directed towards individual journalists or the institution (Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Mayerhöffer 2021; McDowell-Naylor, Cushion, and Thomas 2021; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Since criticism of a perceived mainstream is often an editorial driving force behind the production of alternative media, it opens an empirical question: to what degree and in what ways does “alternative” represent something different to “mainstream.” In doing so, we can also ask how we normatively evaluate this form of alternativeness on a macro, meso or micro level (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Kenix 2011). Research on alternative news media often implicitly study such actors as an extension of news diversity, although how alternative news media contribute to external diversity (the amount of news outlets available and how distinct they are between media in a market or ecosystem) or the different alternative media’s internal diversity (the diversity within one media product) is rarely addressed explicitly. This may indicate that scholars adopt the alternative media’s self-described position as counter-voices, as scholars have primarily been interested in the “alternativeness” of alternative media rather than studying these outlets in a comparative, wider media sphere.

The contributions in this special issue analyse alternative news media in various ways, including from a comparative perspective (methodological approach and empirical data) and by addressing alternative news media’s contribution to news diversity in different contexts. To start a discussion of how alternative media contribute to news diversity, this introduction synthesizes the findings from these excellent organizational and content analysis studies. To discuss how and to what extent the alternative news media analysed contribute to *news diversity*, it will elaborate on the concept of diversity, the democratic role of media and the normative implications of the position of alternative media in the wider media sphere.

Alternative Media and News Diversity

A core dimension of alternative media outlets and their quest for legitimacy, lies in the criticism of established media, including scepticism against i) the structural conditions of the established press, ii) the people working as journalists and their practices

and iii) the content in mainstream media. Media criticism from left-leaning alternative news media is often directed at the commercial values of the press, while right-wing initiatives have been more concerned with perceived ideological partisanship within professional journalism (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021; Cushion 2022; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Mayerhöffer 2021; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Both right-wing and left-wing alternative media actors, including their audiences, share a perspective of a press institution that is not living up to its own standards and both see established news media as not representing a sufficient diversity of viewpoints (Holt 2020; Rauch 2019, 2020). Thus, balancing or countering such perceived systematic imbalances with politically or socially/culturally radical content and style becomes an important editorial claim made by alternative news media. In this special issue, Chadha and Bhat (2022, in this issue) analyse how the right-wing Indian alternative news portal *OpIndia* systematically delegitimize, and discredit established news outlets through persuasive attacks. In a textual analysis of 576 “fact checking” articles, they identify six major rhetorical strategies that were employed by *OpIndia* to “accuse” mainstream news outlets of being biased, partisan, elite-oriented, unprofessional and harmful. The strategies used, including pejorative labelling, associating mainstream media with offensive values and ideologies, defining its actions as inconsistent or hypocritical, claiming that mainstream media had bad intentions, offended repeatedly, and engendered harmful consequences for society, portray a manipulative, partisan mainstream media. The paper illustrates a striking paradox regarding alternative media criticism, namely how alternative media systematically criticise the established news media for being biased and partisan, while at the same time insisting their own often one-sided and ideologically motivated “campaign” journalism is a necessary corrective and counterpoint. By building an alternative far-right communicative environment and platform, *OpIndia* position themselves as “self-ascribed” counter-voices that allegedly broaden external diversity by correcting and exposing media establishment.

While alternative media criticise the established news media, it is also an empirical question if and to what extent alternative news media live up to the ideal of representing something different and what this kind of diversity represents. The literature on media diversity and pluralism has been concerned not only with how to measure diversity, but also with the normative function of media diversity in a democracy (Christians et al. 2009, Joris et al. 2020; Loecherbach et al. 2020; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). There is generally a high degree of agreement in this literature that the media (however broadly defined) play a crucial role in any democratic society, centred around providing citizens with the information necessary to make informed political and personal choices. The media should also represent a diverse public by including an array of actors, ideas and opinions, making pluralist society visible and therefore discussable and negotiable (Helberger 2019). However, political theories vary substantially in their conceptualization of a “good” democracy according to normative expectations about the role of the media and of public spheres (Nussbaum 2011). What kind of theoretical lens is employed is particularly important when addressing the value and impact of alternative news media, that on one level can contribute to a more diverse news landscape and serve as a healthy corrective to the mainstream, but also promote suspicion, distrust and hate through hostile media criticism and anti-democratic positions (Boberg et al. 2020;

Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Haanshuus and Ihlebaek 2021; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

Broadly, the literature distinguishes between a liberative, deliberative or antagonistic model of democracy (Loecherbach et al. 2020; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). These three normative frameworks represent somewhat different roles for the media and consequently also see the overarching goals of media diversity differently. In the liberal model the media plays a monitorial or representative role – checking on the government as representatives for the people, informing and representing the public (Christians et al. 2009). Here, the main aim for media diversity is to mirror society, reflect social heterogeneity and avoid bias and partisanship (Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). In the deliberative model the media is seen as transmitters of social heterogeneity and the main arena where public consensus is constructed, what is often described as the media's facilitative role (Christians et al. 2009). Within this framework the media's main aim is to provide a forum for a civil, informed, and rational public debate, and media diversity becomes important in order to include all viewpoints (Ferree et al. 2002; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). This position is most often associated with Habermas (1962) deliberative ideals for the public sphere, i.e. the ideal of rational debate, representative ideals, deliberativeness, dialogue, and mutual respect, but has also been extended to include more constructive ideals which values popular inclusion and oppositional interpretations to expand discourse and challenge dominant positions (Downey and Fenton 2003; Fraser 1990). In the agonistic model the media and public sphere are seen first and foremost as spaces for ideological struggle (Barnhurst and Nerone 2009; Christians et al. 2009; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). In advocating for an agonistic, pluralist, view of politics, Mouffe (2013) pushes back against an over-adherence to rationality as conceived of in liberal theory, instead noting a diversity of political opinions as necessary to the extent those occupying different perspectives do not try to negate one another (2013, 75). Within this approach, then, a more radical or adversarial media can serve as a valuable platform for opposition and resistance.

When we assess news diversity, then, the normative foundation for our analysis is of great importance, not only to evaluate the role, value, and impact of news diversity in democracy, but also because it influences what kind of news providers that should be included in empirical analyses (Joris et al. 2020). Today, these debates are more complicated than before due to the abundance of news providers in the high-choice and hybrid digital media landscape, and scholars have questioned whether debates on diversity have become irrelevant (Karppinen 2013). The distinction between media content and news is increasingly intertwined as a growing number of outlets positioned on the periphery of professional journalism produce semi-professional "news" (Eldridge 2018), making it challenging to quantify news and distinguish it from other content (Hendrickx 2020). As far as we are aware, alternative news media have often been excluded in broader assessments of news diversity, indicating that alternative media have not been defined as "news media" or seen as important enough to be included. There are several reasons for integrating contemporary alternative media into ongoing academic debates on news diversity. First, alternative news media by definition aim to add to or challenge the perceived lack of diversity of established news

media and thus (potentially) represent drivers of diversity in the current high-choice hybrid media landscape. Second, contemporary alternative news media have become influential, and sometimes even professionalised competitors to the established news media within different media contexts (see Rae 2021). As a result, examining the extent to which they contribute to news diversity is key for understanding rapidly changing media landscapes. Third, because alternative news media are often seen as drivers of more concerning trends such as audience fragmentation, the rise of false, manipulative or hyper-partisan news, falling levels of trust, and the collapse of the traditional business models in established news journalism, it is also important to include these media in broader diversity debates (also see Hendrickx 2020; Joris et al. 2020).

In the following section we will focus on how alternative news media contribute to diversity. Empirically, media diversity can be studied in several ways and in different phases of the communication chain. McQuail (1992) distinguishes between diversity at the level of structure (media ownership, types of media and media's geographical reach) and diversity at the level of performance (opinions, information and culture). Similarly, Napoli's (1999) differentiates between source diversity (whether there is a variety of content providers i.e. ownership models, workforce diversity), content diversity (whether media content is diverse i.e. format, program type, ideas, viewpoints, demographics), and exposure diversity (to which extent audiences receive diverse sources and content) (the diversity chain). Based on the contributions to this special issue, we will particularly focus on the organizational (meso) and content (micro) levels.

The Organizational Level

One way to approach alternative media outlets and how they contribute to news diversity is by looking at the organizational level, and more specifically to what degree alternative media represent something different when it comes to funding models, organizational structures, workforce diversity or production routines, which again influence how news is selected, shaped and framed (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Historically, alternative media stem from a fundamental critique of the historical development and expansion of large, commercial mass media, its hierarchical organizational structures and hegemonic power (Atton 2002; Atton and Hamilton 2008; Fuchs 2010; Hamilton 2000). As Barnhurst and Nerone (2009) have argued, while processes of professionalization allowed professional journalism to define itself according to this need for an informed citizenry, alternative (and radical) political theory advocated an alternative vision, where journalism "could become the mission of the vanguard" through politically radical approaches to news media (2009, 22). Downing for instance emphasized how "small-scale" media must "express an alternative vision to hegemonic politics, priorities, and perspectives" (Downing 2001, V). In contrast to commercial mass media, then, alternative media have often been characterized by non-hierarchical organizational structures and collaborative production routines to secure a more inclusive and participatory form of news production that can help to empower ordinary people (Atton 2002; Fuchs 2010; Harcup 2005; Haas 2004).

Of course, the boundaries between large-scale professional commercial media organizations and small-scale alternative or digital media initiatives, have never been clear-cut (Atton 2002, 2015; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Kenix 2011). The

already blurry boundaries have become even more difficult to distinguish due to digitalization which has severely lowered the threshold for new initiatives. Consequently, a wide range of new peripheral actors have entered the field (Eldridge 2018; Ihlebaek and Figenschou 2022). As they have done so, the line between alternative and established media have also blurred; as Rae (2021) points out, many partisan and alternative media sites have professionalized as they have grown more influential as agenda-setters, employing the same editorial routines as traditional newsrooms. Furthermore, as stressed by Atton and Wickenden (2005, 351) the “absence of professionalization in alternative news media does not prevent them being subject to pressures similar to those in mainstream media,” including deadline pressure. In addition, the lack of professionalization often leads to poor production resources, inexperienced and/or unqualified volunteer reporters, poor relations to established news sources, and slow, unorganized collective editorial decision processes. Small-scale, collective, activist media are also in danger of being short-lived, as their possibility of reaching a broad audience base has been limited and because they often are dependent on the enthusiasm and loyalty of small groups of people.

Such insights lead to fundamental and difficult questions concerning how alternative-ness is expressed at an organizational level, how different they are from established media, and also how the organizational forms of alternative media might change over time as new initiatives professionalize and grow. In a study of news production processes and internal power relations of alternative media in Turkey and Greece published in this special issue, Aslan Ozgul and Veneti (2022, in this issue) identify this diversity of “alternativeness” and how some alternative media projects become increasingly similar to professional actors as they expand. They point out how scale matters in terms of how news production is carried out, and how large-scale projects in both countries differ from small-scale alternative media when it comes to whether staff have an equal say and whether they are involved in editorial decision-making processes, as well as what kind of news values are emphasized. The authors point out that when alternative initiatives expand, a more hierarchical organizational model is often employed to ensure efficiency and quality of the production. Importantly though, while the organizational features of some of the sites became more similar to established media, the staff still engaged in collective meetings and continued to emphasize the culture of participation and giving voice to ordinary people. This illustrates how, while conditions might change, ideals of “the collective” and “inclusion” can be ensured in other ways. Importantly, individuals involved in these alternative media projects strongly identified with core values embedded in deliberative and participatory democratic ideals, like offering alternative narratives, empowering ordinary citizens and, sometimes, the value of impartiality.

Questions concerning identity and production culture are also addressed in the articles by Harlow (2022) and Medeiros and Badr (2022). Harlow's (2022, in this issue) study illuminates how digital-native news sites in Latin American countries both embody and reject features of mainstream *and* alternative media. In her study she explores how journalists with digital-native sites in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela, identify as journalists, and to what degree they express a distance or opposition to the mainstream. In her study she finds that the journalists did not consider themselves as alternative media producers nor as belonging to the

mainstream. Harlow argues that they, instead, represent a hybrid, or *mestizaje*, where journalists identify as professionals, but critique the values and practices of the established elite press. Innovation in organizational forms and content, as well as focusing on participation and inclusion, were key discursive markers for this group. A combination of crowdsourcing, merchandise, events, funding from foundations and advertising, was promoted as necessary to produce independent quality reporting covering topics overlooked by the established press. Referring to the media systems and lack of media pluralism in many Latin American countries, journalists foregrounded the need for content serving the people and the need to take an active stance against political injustice.

In Medeiros and Badr's (2022, in this issue) study they explore how experienced journalists make an active choice to work as "engaged journalists" within newsrooms, operating as progressive allies and at "the margins of traditional journalism" (2022, 4). Their motivations are often linked to a critique of the commercial and hierarchical structured legacy media and the need to take a more political and activist position. Studying meta-journalistic discourse in the context of Brazil and Egypt, both of which are characterized by political authoritarian tendencies, the authors discuss how journalists' identities are connected to openly stating their normativity and building legitimacy through practice. Their peripheral position and often uncertain financial grounds are presented as assets, demonstrating their independence, in order to strengthen journalism's democratic function from the margins.

These studies confirm that there are a range of different organizational forms, from one-person initiatives to large-scale alternative news projects. Where some keep a collective, participatory and non-hierarchical production structure, others gradually adopt more professional production and organizational practices. On the organizational level, we find that size matters, as a larger staff and increased editorial ambitions necessitate the implementation of hierarchical structures to ensure efficient production and prevent misinformation. Importantly, the reporters and editors involved proclaim a strong identity not necessarily as "alternative journalists," but as doing something *closer to the deliberative and participatory normative ideals of journalism*, with a strong urge to promote subaltern, marginalized narratives. Defined as "professional-alternative" journalism (Aslan Ozgul and Veneti 2022, in this issue), popular *mestizaje* journalism (Harlow 2022, in this issue) or a particular form of engaged journalism (Medeiros and Badr 2022, in this issue), the actor/production studies in this special issue illustrate the growth of semi-professional variations of digital journalism in the global hybrid media landscape. A key takeaway from this research is that even as editorial routines are professionalized within larger alternative media, the editorial culture and self-positioning amongst journalists are strongly rooted in participatory progressive ideals. Diversity, in this context, is primarily expressed as an alternative culture and identity, and not just as an alternative form of production structure.

The Content Level

Diversity in news content is considered by many scholars to be key to fulfilling the news media's democratic role in society as information providers, facilitators of public debate and critical watchdogs (Christians et al. 2009). Content diversity is therefore

assessed as imperative in classic conceptualizations of media diversity (McQuail 1992; Napoli 1999) and there is a vast research literature analysing to what extent the established news media is publishing a wide enough range of issues, voices, actors and viewpoints (Hendrickx 2020; Joris et al. 2020). Content diversity is analysed in the context of the media system that produces it, taking into account media ownership and media type (online vs. offline, newspapers vs. television), with online news and social media content gaining particular interest in recent years. Overall, previous studies of content diversity find that online news have greater diversity of viewpoints than traditional “offline” news (Powers and Benson 2014), although the content diversity in online media is also generally low (Humprecht and Esser 2018). Several of the contributions in this special issue illuminate the content of alternative news media, by systematically analysing how *different* or *similar* it is to established news media content, and further analysing variety between alternative news media with different ideological positions (e.g. Russian sponsored, right-wing and left-wing). Together, these studies add to the extant literature on alternative news media which have largely lacked systematic, quantitative and comparative content analysis. The methods and data in these papers give us a starting point to discuss how alternative media contribute to external diversity in different political and cultural contexts.

In unpacking these differences, one key dimension of news media content is *issue* or *frame diversity*. Analysing alternative media agenda through this measure allows us to discuss the topical emphasis and diversity of alternative media, and subsequently examine how alternative media frame the issues they cover and if and how their framing systematically represents other counter-hegemonic perspectives. The degree to which specific topics or combinations of topics are foregrounded can have both ideological and market motivations; it can indicate whether an alternative outlet has a strong ideological agenda and partisanship position, or it can give insights into whether they target particular niche groups or audience segments to complement the established media, or a mix of the two (Holt 2020). Similarly, content diversification and increased issue diversity, can be explained by an aim to reach larger parts of the audience and maximize the impact that they have and to challenge the established media on more than niche topics. Because most previous studies have been case studies of the coverage of particular events (Harcup, 2003; Atton and Wickenden, 2005) or issues (von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019; Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen, 2019), we have scarce empirical evidence on the content diversification of alternative news outlets (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020).

Müller and Freudenthaler (2022, in this issue) take a step forward, providing a comprehensive comparative automated content analysis of topical structures of a range of German-language alternative news media. Their findings nuance existing studies of the topical emphasis in right-wing alternative news media, as they demonstrate quite diverse topical structures. Whereas topics related to right-wing ideology and populism make up around half of the articles in one group of alternative outlets (labeled “core right-wing populist”), the other outlets studied have topical profiles that largely mirror the broad(er) issue profile of established news media (labelled “topically diverse”). Their findings show that right-wing populist news topics do play a key role in the content profiles of alternative media, and further that the emphasis on populism-related

topics increase before elections, but also that there is an ongoing topic diversification in the alternative media market.

Beyond studying what issues are covered, it is important to analyse *how* they are covered. To that end, frames can be said to convey ideological perspectives on reality, and the degree to which frame repertoires correspond with or deviate from the established media can thus be seen as an indicator of the “alternativeness” of alternative news outlets. Extant studies of framing of immigration in right-wing alternative media and established news media, for example, have identified distinct differences in framing repertoires, including how right-wing outlets foreground threat frames (stressing crime, terror and Islamic fundamentalism), in contrast to established media which also include the immigrants-as-victims frames (von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019; Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen 2019). Combining issue-specific and generic frames as well as measuring frame salience in German established and alternative news outlets, Klawier, Prochazka, and Schweiger (2022, in this issue) give vital new insights into how and to what extent the framing repertoires of alternative media differ from established news. Overall, they find that the division in framing repertoires differ between the two issues studied – immigration and coalition talks (party politics and government negotiations). On immigration they find a “rather seamless shift from conservative mainstream to far-right outlets” (as both emphasize threat/burden frames), whereas the framing of political negotiations and coalition talks demonstrate a clearer division between established media and alternative outlets. Through fine-grained framing analysis, they identify two different editorial styles among outlets positioning themselves as alternative right-wing news media. One group employed a confrontational, interpretive style, making strong use of active framing (frames used or validated by the author/writer/journalist) and expressing hostility towards immigrants, political authorities and the established media (much in line with extant insights on right-wing populist style). The other group represents an ambivalent semi-professional style, less distinguishable from the established news media, more descriptive in style – striving to be both provocative and professional.

Another key aim for alternative media is to invert and diversify established source hierarchies (Atton 2002). Within journalism studies a large body of literature has found that established news media give elite sources (particularly those associated with political authorities) crucial advantages in the competition for news access, and hence that the range of viewpoints voiced in the established news media largely reflect internal variation in elite consensus and disagreement between elites, whereas initiatives outside these circles receive less media attention. These sourcing routines are further found to discriminate against dissident, radical or “unofficial” sources, which are largely marginalized and when invited in are more prone to be demonized or ridiculed (Manning 2001). To counter these established source hierarchies, alternative media aim to give voice to marginalized groups such as i) grassroots sources and “ordinary people” who struggle to access the established news media to promote their accounts and experiences from the ground, ii) deviant actors or groups deemed too controversial or illegitimate to be granted access to established media debates, and/or iii) activists and leaders of social movements who challenge the authority of traditional

experts, and particularly counter-elites (protest leaders, campaigners, etc.) were frequently quoted as sources (Atton 2002; Harcup 2003; Atton and Wickenden 2005).

In this special issue we present a systematic, quantitative analysis of sourcing in alternative news media. In their quantitative mapping of source diversity in alternative and established news outlets in Belgium, Buyens and Van Aelst (2022)¹ compare both left-wing and right-wing alternative media to more mainstream outlets in their coverage of two issues: – migration and social affairs. They analyse both which actors are able to gain exposure and visibility in the media (what they label passive actors) which are quoted directly and given voice in the news items (what they label active actors). As a measure of how many different actors are mentioned or quoted in each article, they find that all the alternative news outlets display higher levels of internal actor diversity when compared to mainstream outlets in the analysis and further that this difference is explained by the long articles in the alternative outlets. Studying what kind of actors are included on an aggregated level (external actor diversity), Buyens and Van Aelst find that both alternative and established news focus on elite actors over ordinary citizens. Moreover, particularly right-wing outlets are markedly top-down, displaying a one-sided approach to which elite actors are covered (particularly radical right-wing political parties and politicians). In contrast, the left-wing outlets studied display more bottom-up source strategies, giving voice to more vulnerable groups. These two types of alternative media thus contribute to actor diversity in different ways, widening the type of politicians included and thus countering perceived liberal bias (the right-wing alternative media) and societal capitalist imbalances (the left-wing alternative media).

Beyond classical source/actor, frame, and source diversity studies, understanding the extent to which alternative media reference other media (including via hyperlinks) has become vital in studying the position of and how different or how integrated alternative news outlets are in the broader hybrid, networked media landscape. A key question here has been what kind of other (media) sources do alternative media build on and integrate, and how do they make use of these sources. Extant studies have shown that alternative news media refer to a wide spectrum of actors, including established news media (Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020; Heft et al. 2021). This referencing pattern has led scholars to question the alleged counter-position of alternative media, including how these patterns align with findings by other scholars who have argued that alternative media only include mainstream sources when it serves their partisan cause and ideological stance, and even then, they recontextualize and reframe the original item (Haller and Holt 2019; Haanshuus and Ihlebaek 2021). In their comparative analysis of referencing in six countries (US, UK, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Denmark), Mayerhöffer and Heft (2022, in this issue) contribute a comprehensive mapping of referencing characteristics in alternative news media. This important contribution finds that many of the alternative media studied were characterized by very limited use of original sources, and rather reference external sources such as established media and right-wing partisan actors. How the alternative media use such (previously published) material varies markedly – from plagiarism or recycling to media reliance. Moreover, they find source diversity is further limited by referencing primarily those actors representing right-wing partisan actors, although left-leaning media and politicians are

referenced too. Far-right alternative media are rarely referenced, however, a referencing pattern which indicates that these alternative media primarily see each other as competitors, rather than as allies mobilizing against the establishment and for a common cause. Further, this referencing study finds little evidence of recontextualization and reframing of the referenced sources, which indicate that the outlets studied first and foremost have assessed these references as accessible and cheap content.

On the content level, studies in this special issue carry out extensive quantitative mappings of alternative media content. Taken together, they reveal the diversity of alternative news output. By comparing different kinds of alternative and established news media, these studies demonstrate that a striking number of alternative media outlets cover largely the same issues, frames, sources and references as the established news media they seek to challenge. The ongoing topic and framing diversification within the alternative media market may make alternative outlets more competitive and more relevant for a broader audience, but this also makes them less distinct when compared to established media. Further, the sourcing and referencing studies illustrate how interwoven the editorial agenda of alternative news media is with that of established news media. For instance, the alternative media studied primarily reference external sources such as established media outlets, but only rarely dismiss or reframe the content. The aggregated insights from these content studies thus epitomize the ambivalent dependency of alternative media, and how they are simultaneously heavily dependent on, a reaction to and sometimes correctives of the established media. At the same time, studies find that a minority of the far-right alternative news media studied do represent a truly different position. These outlets are characterized by a hyper-partisan issue profile, hostile populist framing of politics, and an aggressive style (e.g. accusations of manipulation, representing opponents as arrogant, naïve or moralistic, etc.). In the few cases where content is radically different, this again raises the question of how valuable this content diversity is, which again depends on where the benchmark for diversity is set.

Alternative Media and News Diversity: Professionalization and Polarization

The contributions to this special issue enable us to start a discussion as to how and to what extent alternative news media contributes to *news diversity*. In this introduction, we have problematized how we approach diversity in the context of new alternative media initiatives, forcing a discussion about the inbuilt normativity within both the alternative media literature and assessments of diversity (see, among others: Christians et al. 2009; Loecherbach et al. 2020; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015).

A key takeaway from this special issue is how we normatively evaluate two opposite tendencies in the alternative/professional nexus: processes of professionalization and of polarization. At one level, the studies in this special issue document how alternative media sites are not so different from the mainstream media and, furthermore, that some sites professionalize as they expand, making the distinction less significant. At another level, some alternative media initiatives operate on the outer fringes in terms of their position, production and product. While these sites contribute to

diversity, a particularly difficult question in both the literature on alternative media and discussions of news diversity, is how to assess such radical actors normatively. This is particularly the case when it comes to “far-right alternative media,” which is a broad category used to describe media including a range of controversial, hyperpartisan, radical media, and sometimes even non-factual media outlets (Boberg et al. 2020; Holt 2020). These observations signal the importance of scholars positioning their evaluation of alternative media not only within a media system and cultural and political contexts, but also against normative benchmarks found in different democratic schools. This is important because an appreciation of the normative purpose of alternative media guides our ability to understand what role such news providers play in society and if, when and how they strengthen or weaken democracy.

We have pointed out that from a liberal democratic perspective, a marketplace-of-ideas is cherished, and new start-ups of all kinds can potentially fill needs in the market and increase individual choice (Christians et al. 2009; Loecherbach et al. 2020). The increase in the number of alternative news producers can strengthen the representation of socially heterogeneous societies, however ideally these media should adhere to professional standards striving for balance and impartiality, fulfilling the role as a public watchdog (Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). Modes of professionalization among alternative start-ups can be interpreted as a positive development, as it moves them closer to the normative ideals of non-partisan, balanced, and informative journalism. Radical, antagonistic and unprofessional actors on the fringes, on the other hand, may fill a need in the market, but arguably these can also be interpreted as weakening democracy if they give a skewed and false picture of reality.

From a deliberative democratic model, professionalisation in terms of elite-orientation of both alternative and established news outlets is more problematic, even while acknowledging that deliberative schools approach elites, participation, and the role of counter-publics somewhat differently (Fraser 1990, Fuchs 2010). In this special issue, several studies have documented that while some alternative sites professionalize, participatory and inclusive ideals continue to be important discursive markers embedded in the newsroom culture and the identity of journalists involved in the initiatives. The normative ideals that traditionally have been seen as vital to both the editorial aims and output of left-wing progressive alternative media, is substantiated in this special issue. Radical hyperpartisan alternative media would, on the one hand, be valued for expanding the number of voices and perspectives in more participatory editorial practices. At the same time, such initiatives may violate deliberative ideals of affirmative pluralism through a partisan, opinionated style, and often-harsh criticism of their opponents. If the voices and perspectives included in alternative content are hostile, uncivil or emotional (i.e. ridicule, online attacks and aggressive language), the deliberative schools warn of a negative effect if those attacked, particularly marginalized minorities and vulnerable groups in society, are silenced. This critique stems from a view of the importance of reasonable disagreement that is similarly bound to the mutual respect of one’s fellow citizens (Nussbaum 2010, 2011).

In contrast to the other two models, it can be argued that the agonistic model evaluates oppositional, deviant, counter-voices differently (Christians et al. 2009). Following this model, media and the public sphere are first and foremost seen as

spaces for ideological struggle (Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). From Mouffe (2013) we can extend the thinking about diversity in politics to diversity in journalism, pushing back against boundaries that would discern journalism on lines of objectivity, or neutrality, opening the door to more alternative and ardently political media. Mouffe's (2013) advocacy for an agonistic, pluralist, society would to a higher degree welcome radical alternative media, to the extent they can abide to certain frameworks of agreement or convey mutual respect as a minimum requirement (Nussbaum 2010, 2011). Drawing a distinction between agonistic friends and antagonistic enemies, we can extend the perspective on democracy and political society to imagine a pluralist agonistic field of journalism, featuring more emotional and critical, and even pointedly critical media voices, that reflect a shared overall pursuit of journalism's ends, while drawing distinctions between these alternative media and more disruptive actors who fail to do so (see Eldridge 2019). A key issue, then, from all normative perspectives, is to evaluate alternative news and their contribution to information, participation, resistance, and diversity, but also to consider their respect for other positions and actors within societies. Ultimately, such assessments also concern the limits of free speech and how free speech is governed in different political contexts.

Finally, how we normatively assess alternative media sites and their contribution to diversity and democracy is closely connected to how we study the effects specific outlets have on audiences, including their attitudes and behaviours. To do so, we need to move beyond simplistic perceptions of users of alternative media as passive, ignorant, easily manipulated audiences trapped in echo chambers. We are pleased to announce that audiences are examined in the second special issue deriving from our call (forthcoming 2023), which focuses specifically on what role such media play in people's news diets and everyday life, and how consumption of alternative media is connected to levels of trust and attitudes in different political and cultural contexts. In doing so, we join our contributors in trying to expand the ways we think about alternative media in new and nuanced ways. By drawing attention to both the challenges alternative media pose and the contributions they make to diverse, complex societies, the work presented in these special issues hopes to shed new light on the nature of alter-nativeness and those engaged with contesting the mainstream.

Note

1. The article 'Alternative Media, Alternative Voices? A Quantitative Analysis of Actor Diversity in Alternative and Mainstream News Outlets' by Willem Buyens and Peter Van Aelst was submitted and accepted as a contribution to this Special Issue. However, due to a production error, the article was mistakenly published in *Digital Journalism*, Volume 10, Issue 2 (pp. 337-359). It can be found at DOI:10.1080/21670811.2021.1929366

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