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This is the published version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Haller, A., Holt, K., de la Brosse, R. (2019)
The 'other' alternatives:: Political right-wing alternative media
Journal of alternative and community media, 4(1): 1-6

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

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The 'other' alternatives: Political right-wing alternative media

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* presents five articles that examine right-wing alternative media from different countries and contexts: Brazil, the United States, Germany and Finland. They focus on different aspects of a phenomenon that has come to the forefront of public debate in recent years, due to the many apparently successful alternative media enterprises that can be characterised as conservative, libertarian, populist or far to extreme right wing on a political scale. While there has been much (and often heated) public debate about this, researchers tend to lag behind when it comes to new trends, and a transient and rapidly changing media landscape. The articles in this special issue are therefore especially valuable, since they all provide empirically grounded perspectives on specific cases that illustrate different parts of a large puzzle that is in much need of illumination. This special issue is of use not just to communication research, but also to the public debate on disinformation on the internet.

Keywords

Alternative media; disinformation; libertarianism; media landscape; populism; public debate; right-wing media

Introduction

In this special issue of the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*, we present five original articles that study right-wing alternative media from different countries, and therefore quite different contexts: Brazil, the United States, Germany and Finland. They focus on different aspects of a phenomenon that has come to the forefront of public debate in recent years, due to the many apparently successful alternative media enterprises that can be characterised as either conservative, libertarian, populist or far- to extreme right wing on a political scale. While there has been much (and often heated) public debate about this, researchers tend to lag behind when

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it comes to new trends, and a transient and rapidly changing media landscape. The different contributions found in this special issue are therefore especially valuable, since they all provide empirically grounded perspectives on specific cases that illustrate different parts of a large puzzle that is in much need of illumination. This special issue will be fruitful not only for communication research, but also for the public debate on disinformation on the internet.

Historically, research on alternative media has been deeply rooted in the media scepticism of the 1970s, and is especially influenced by cultural studies and the critical school. In this scholarly tradition, the main aim of alternative forms of journalism is construed to challenge the bourgeois 'mainstream media', and its professional as well as discursive practices (Atton, 2015). Moreover, alternative media producers want to give voice to minorities (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008) and, particularly in left-wing journalism, they want to overcome the cultural hegemony of political and economic elites fostered by established media (Schweiger, 2017). Consequently, studies on alternative media focus mainly on left-wing conceptions (Beywl & Brombach, 1982; Holtz-Bacha, 2015), on alternative media as oppositional instruments (Schweiger, 2017) and on community media (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Harnischmacher, 2015). However, as Chris Atton (2006: 574) points out, 'little attention has been paid to right-wing media as alternative media'.

In today's media landscape, though, we see a vast spectrum of right-wing media, such as the *Breitbart News Network*, *The Alex Jones Show* and *Infowars*. Although many right-wing platforms have little impact, some prominent organisations have a high reach in terms of followers, numbers of 'likes' or circulation rates (Holt, 2018). In addition, we witness that alternative right-wing media are gaining importance in daily politics. For instance, *Breitbart News Network* and the blog *The Gateway Pundit* entered the White House Press Corps after the election of Donald Trump. In France, too, right-wing alternative media seem to have won a first round in the battle of the internet, with an agenda to 'reinform' the public in a bid to counter traditional media accused of collusion with the elite against the French people (Albertini & Doucet, 2016). The response of researchers to this development has been mixed. Given the growing number of populist political victories in recent years, there has been a remarkable surge in the amount of literature about the relationship between populism and the media (e.g. Engesser et al., 2017; Haller & Holt, 2018; Krämer, 2014; Aalberg et al., 2016). A number of studies have also focused on the media of the radical or extreme right (e.g. Cammaerts, 2018), but the issue is more complex than simply being a matter of populism or extremism – or both). Today – especially online – we see alternative media of a right-wing persuasion from a wide spectrum of positions, with the common trait that they view themselves as representatives of perspectives that are somehow not represented fairly within the realm of the mainstream.

Before we introduce the different contributions in this special issue, therefore, we need to first dedicate some thought to the conceptualisation that underlies it. Against the background of the theoretical frameworks surrounding scholarship on alternative media, we must first ask whether it is even possible to use the term 'alternative media' about the cases that will be dealt with in the articles contained in this volume. This question can, at first glance, seem odd; yet it must be asked, because there are also many other terms that have been used. Given the predominantly 'progressive' qualities ascribed to counter-hegemonic alternative media in much previous research, it seems that many scholars are reluctant to use this term, and instead employ terms like 'junk news', 'fake news', 'hyper-partisan media', 'conspiracy media' and 'propaganda outlets' (Hedman, Sivnert & Howard, 2018). While acknowledging that these terms might accurately describe some problematic phenomena in today's highly polarised and combative media environment, we argue that 'alternative media' is a valid description of media on the right as well as on the left – or, indeed, any other movement that employs media for counter-hegemonic purposes, such as for religious or cultural reasons. According to our stipulation, alternative media

are run by various kinds of actors who publish alternative reports and interpretations of current events as a direct response to the perception that the perspective they promote (political, ideological, moral, cultural, religious) is being treated unfairly in the mainstream media. In that sense, they are first and foremost 'reactive' (Haller & Holt, 2018), and always exist in an oppositional relation to what is perceived as the mainstream. While it is likely that this definition will include many examples of false reporting, propaganda, extremism and hate speech, and a high level of partisanship, these qualities cannot be assumed from the outset, but must instead be demonstrated through careful research in cases where such descriptions are appropriate (Holt and de la Brosse, 2017). Alternative media might also exhibit various levels of (positive or negative) impact on the surrounding media landscape and associated public discourse. While many alternative media that promote extreme or fringe agendas probably 'live their lives mostly unnoticed by the vast majority' (Holt, 2018: 55), other more moderate alternative media may manage to attract a large following as well as reactions from the mainstream media that put them in the spotlight. In our view, it is therefore important, from a scholarly perspective, to study both the alternative media on the fringes as well as more moderate alternative media and their relationship and interaction with, as well as their impact on, the wider public discourse. This special issue of the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* focuses on alternative right-wing media published online as well as offline to close the research gap in the right-wing media spectrum. It is an attempt to gather researchers who are currently conducting research on alternative media that can be placed to the right of the conservative centre-right on a political/ideological spectrum, and thereby offer an overview of different approaches – theoretical as well as methodological – taken to address this complex issue.

Communication research on alternative right-wing media is fundamental because of two major developments in the field of political right-wing media. First, a strong interdependent relationship is emerging between right-wing populist politicians and right-wing media, particularly on the internet. Second, right-wing media are becoming increasingly professionalised in their organisation and marketing. The first process can be verified in US politics, where right-wing media outlets gained access to the White House either on the level of policy-making, as in the employment of former *Breitbart* journalists Stephen Bannon and Julia Hahn, or on the level of journalistic work, in terms of press accreditations of right-wing alternative media *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* (Haller, 2018). It is assumed that political players pursue strategic goals by establishing symbiotic connections to these media: alternative media fulfil the function of bypassing classical mainstream media. Close relationships with right-wing media can further be classified as symbolic communicative acts for media sceptics and critics. This is strongly connected to a populist worldview in which established journalism is constructed as a part of 'the elite', which would act against the will of 'the people' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007: 324). In particular, smaller alternative media outlets like blogs or social network site accounts with less outreach are still dependent on the coverage of established media companies, and this is manifested in a paradoxical relationship (Haller & Holt, 2018): a study shows that social media accounts of the populist movements PEGIDA in Germany and Austria refer to mainstream media articles in an affirmative way to support own political standpoints (Haller & Holt, 2018). This phenomenon can be explained by an absence of journalistic professionalisation, which leads to deficits. Most alternative media do not employ correspondents, photographers or marketing specialists because of a lack of economic foundations; however, there are some alternative media platforms with a high reach and a professionalised staff in the United States (*Breitbart News Network*, *The Gateway Pundit*, *The Daily Caller*, *Infowars*) as well as in Europe (*Breitbart London*, *Compact Magazine*, *Kopp Publishing House*, *PI-News*). These examples show that media projects on the political fringes gain success along with generating increasing voter shares for right-wing parties. This special issue presents recent findings on the emergence of right-wing alternative media and examines the possible socio-political impacts.

Richard Romancini and Fernanda Castilho's article, 'Strange fruit: The rise of Brazil's "new right-wing" and the Non-Partisan School Movement', offers a unique look into Twitter discussions related to the Non-Partisan School Movement in Brazil (Escola Sem Partido, or ESP). ESP is an initiative against political and ideological indoctrination in schools. The movement's rhetoric reflects now president-elect Jair Bolsonaro's views, and especially tends to raise concerns about socialist indoctrination of children in schools, and lately the spread of controversial gender ideology. It therefore belongs to a growing trend of popular movements and populist politicians that protest against what is perceived (and often referred to) as a Gramscian attempt on the part of intellectuals, professors, teachers, journalists and other cultural workers, such as artists, actors and filmmakers, to impose and uphold hegemonic progressive values in society. The content analysis of the ESP Twitter flow shows that the movement mainly represents the right-wing and conservative values that resonated with Bolsonaro's election campaign talking points.

Elina Noppari, Ilmari Hiltunen and Laura Ahva focus on the user perspective of populist online communication. They conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 24 users of populist counter-media (PCM) websites in Finland. The results show three major types of user motivation: (1) system sceptics who are deeply dissatisfied with the political and media system; (2) agenda critics who highlight scepticism on the journalistic representation of topics; and (3) casually discontent users who access PCM occasionally for various reasons such as information and entertainment. The authors enrich research on political alternative media by offering insights into the individual level of media choice. This case study of Finland shows that right-wing media engagement is an active and conscious selection of alternative media platforms.

In their article, Gerret von Nordheim, Henrik Müller and Michael Scheppe presents findings from an innovative algorithm-based topic-modelling analysis that compares the German right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (jungefreiheit.de) with the biggest mainstream newspapers in Germany in terms of how the migration crisis of 2015–16 was described. Not surprisingly, the difference was very clear: while the mainstream media tended to report more from a larger European perspective, *Junge Freiheit* was focused more specifically on the German scene, and while the mainstream media reported on a number of aspects related to the large number of immigrants, *Junge Freiheit* had a more limited repertoire. The article also looks at the ways in which *Junge Freiheit* relates to mainstream media outlets – in other words, whether it is predominantly 'reactive' and tends mostly to cover stories already addressed by the mainstream media, or acts more autonomously by covering things and aspects that are otherwise marginalised in the mainstream media. The results show a clear tendency towards the former, indicating that alternative media need to be understood as phenomena that always exist in relation to that to which they perceive themselves as alternatives (Haller & Holt, 2018; Holt, 2018), and that this can be studied effectively through the kind of content analysis employed in this study.

For Jan R Riebling and Ina von der Wense, the recent growth in the number and influence of alternative media sites and sources has also witnessed the rise of an aggressive rhetoric decrying mass media, or parts of them, as being untrustworthy and politically biased. While it is unclear to them whether the 'fake news' debate is directly connected to this, it is surely a framing of mass media. The added value of their research consists in using techniques of quantitative text analysis in order to analyse how the 'fake news' frame is structured and what its central determinants are in terms of social context and political orientation. Through the use of quantitative text analysis, they deconstruct the frame usage and semantic embeddedness of eight blogs. Through their original approach, they succeed in finding evidence for a generalised frame that tends to be independent of the political orientation of the blog.

An important basis of public discourse is the commonly shared collective memory of a society. Krzysztof Wasilewski analyses the creation of a counter-collective memory by US alt-right media by studying the coverage in the *New York Times* and in *Breitbart News* of the Confederacy's

legacy and the discussion of the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, Virginia. He argues that far-right media strategically produce an ethically exclusive collective memory as a counterpart to a United States-American mainstream collective memory by using left-wing language. The strategic goal of alt-right media is to create their own version of collective memory for counter-hegemonic reasons. This alt-right version can be classified as an inclusive collective memory exclusively for white Americans leaning towards the alt-right movement. Furthermore, it is revealed that the website's coverage fits the other discourses of the right-wing news platform, and it therefore can be seen as an ideological entity.

Each of these contributions represents a different methodological and theoretical approach, illustrating a research field that is still in its infancy, trying to find ways forward and in need of frameworks that will allow more systematic and comparative analysis. This special issue has to some extent (and in a modest way) attempted to start a process of filling a theoretical and empirical vacuum, since it attempts to analyse the conditions of appearance but also the reasons for the success of right-wing alternative media. Moreover, beyond a phenomenon that has not been seen until recently, and the existing terminological confusion, this special issue has the merit of illustrating the need for further definitional work, from which it will be possible to better name and characterise these new media players in a way that will be fruitful for future systematic and comparative research, which can hopefully shed light on the common aspects as well as the differences of alternative right-wing media.

From a democratic point of view, the existence of a pluralism of the media allowing the expression of the ideas of all tendencies (political, philosophical, religious and so on) crossing a given society constitutes the *sine qua non* condition for the possibility of a rational public discussion of the issues we all face collectively. The rise of these far-right alternative media, as well as the success they are encountering, based in large part on the denunciation of the traditional media as allegedly misguided and/or untrustable, does not fail to question the ability of democratic regimes to peacefully regulate the oppositions that gnaw at them.

Last but not least, there is no doubt that this special issue will contribute to ongoing research in the field of political communication, and will also contribute to the public debate about disinformation on the internet.

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