

Chapter 13

Right-wing alternative media in the Scandinavian political communication landscape

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Abstract

The competition to set the public agenda has become increasingly tough. In this chapter, we explore the role of right-wing alternative media. This kind of news provider constitutes a relatively modest, but distinct, actor in the Scandinavian political communication landscape. Several sites have managed to gain attention through successful social media strategies and controversial reporting, often focusing on topics like immigration, crime, and Islam. In this chapter, we outline how alternative media are conceptualised and theorised in the literature, and how the boundaries between professional and alternative media are drawn and negotiated. Pointing to studies conducted in a Nordic context, we outline key characteristics of the right-wing alternative media scene in Scandinavia. From a research perspective, we argue that there are notable challenges associated with research on right-wing alternative media which are particularly related to fluidity, moving targets, and methodological limitations.

Keywords: alternative media, right-wing, boundaries, immigration, ethics

Introduction

Criticised and contested by some, celebrated and consumed by others, the rise of what has been termed “right-wing media” (Benkler et al., 2018) or “right-wing alternative media” (Holt, 2020) has caused public debates in both Nordic and Western contexts. Critics emphasise the populist, low-quality, sensationalist, and sometimes hateful content found on some of these sites, fearing that they contribute to increased polarisation, distrust, and racism in society. Supporters, on the other hand, argue that such media provide original perspectives and new voices on key issues – like crime, immigration, and Islam – that are not covered by the mainstream press (Nygaard, 2020).

While right-wing alternative media may be a relatively small phenomenon in comparison to the scope and impact of established media, such actors have

managed to exert increasing influence on the public agenda in hybrid digital media systems through active social media strategies and controversial reporting (Chadwick, 2013; Larsson, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019). We argue that exploring this phenomenon is important, because it informs the discussion on how the boundaries between professionals and amateurs, and legitimate and deviant actors have become increasingly difficult to discern in the current political communication environment, and how fierce the competition for attention and authority has become.

In this chapter, we particularly focus on right-wing alternative media that engages in the production of news, including current affairs, commentaries, and analyses (Harcup, 2005; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). We first outline how alternative media have been conceptualised and theorised in the literature. Further, we address how the boundaries between the professional and the alternative have been drawn and point out the key actors central to the process of creating such boundaries. We use theoretical dimensions to look more closely at the right-wing alternative media scene in the Scandinavian region and describe key features of selected sites. Finally, we discuss the notable challenges in the field, particularly those relating to conceptual fluidity, moving targets, and methodological limitations.

Right-wing alternative media – theoretical approaches

There has been a remarkable proliferation of content producers in today’s high-choice online media environment, blurring the lines between what we understand as professional and amateur production, and between producers and consumers (Bruns, 2005). The drastic transformation of who can produce and distribute content represents, on the one hand, a form of democratisation, as the agenda-setting power of the mainstream media is challenged. On the other hand, concerns have deepened about the impact of partisan and alternative news providers, as well as disinformation and “fake news” (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Benkler et al., 2018; Kalsnes, 2019; Leung & Lee, 2014; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). As Holt (2020) points out, the latter should in general not be used to describe right-wing alternative media. Even though misleading content might occur on some sites, it is more often a case of partisan news rather than content that is made up to intentionally mislead the audiences. Essentially, the fundamental questions at stake are: Who sets the agenda in an increasingly hybrid and complex media sphere? And, which actors are conceived as reliable or trustworthy by particular user groups?

The term “alternative media” signifies producers of content that represent something different from the established media. A core question is what constitutes the quality of being “alternative” (Atton, 2002a). It must be stressed from

the start that such distinctions are not easily drawn; it requires approaching the question as continuous boundary-work in the field of news production (Carlson, 2015, 2017; Singer, 2015; Witschge et al., 2018). Several authors stress that it is not a matter of either-or; rather, it is possible to approach mainstream–alternative as a continuum (Harcup, 2005; Holt et al., 2019).

Traditionally, academic interest in alternative media was concerned primarily with initiatives that arose from left-wing activism taking the form of amateur production of magazines, newspapers, films, documentaries, and radio programmes (Atkinson, 2008; Atton, 2002a; Atton, 2002b; Downing, 2001; Fuchs, 2010). Spurred by anti-globalist or anti-capitalist positions, alternative media criticised the traditional media for being elitist, hierarchically organised, and removed from the people – participatory grassroots initiatives were encouraged and applauded. Inspired by social movement theories, studies of alternative media focused on key concepts, such as citizen empowerment, participation and inclusion, and social change (Atton, 2002a; Fuchs, 2010; Haas, 2004). Atkinson and Berg (2012: 520) described alternative media as a form of “resistance performance” and pointed out that “activist organisations utilize alternative media to build worldviews concerning power, to construct strategies for resistance against such power, and to coordinate with other organizations”. Alternative media, from this perspective, should ideally function as a counter-sphere and challenge the mainstream media with their intimate ties to political and economic elites. Haas’s (2004: 115) definition of alternative media also builds on this approach: “Media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform”.

In the last decade, online alternative media initiatives have been increasingly identified as coming from right-wing to far-right and extreme positions (Atton, 2006; Benkler et al., 2018; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2019; Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2020; Padovani, 2016). Describing alternative media as “right-wing” or “far-right” alludes to certain shared ideological ideas reflecting the political field, even though alternative media sites may not have direct political ties (Heft et al., 2020). Scholars have pointed out nationalism and authoritarianism as central denominators that are commonly shared by actors placed on the right-wing of the political scale, as well as a conservative stance on sociocultural matters (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Rydgren, 2018). More extreme far-right positions also include outright racism, xenophobia, fascism, anti-Semitism, and anti-democratic sentiments (Carter, 2018; Mudde, 1995). Studies on what has been characterised as right-wing alternative media sites emphasise similar traits. In particular, a shared and distinct anti-systemness, as well as profound scepticism, or even hostility, towards immigrants, Muslims, left-wing elites, and the mainstream media, is common (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2020). As some of the outlets tend to foster

cultural divisions, racism, and hate, scholars have disagreed on whether the radical and extreme far-right initiatives should be termed “alternative” at all, taking into account the traditional focus on inclusion and democratisation (Atton, 2006).

To overcome the obstacles related to different ideological stances in alternative media, Holt and colleagues (2019: 863) propose a non-normative relational understanding of alternative media and suggest that “alternative news media 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”. Essential in this definition is that “alternativeness” is a strategic label used predominantly by the actors in question to signalise a position. However, the authors also argue that the label can be applied by others, including audiences, researchers, politicians, or competitors. For the definition to have any analytical value, then, it is necessary to clearly outline from which position the label “alternative” is used and why. As a form of self-positioning, a prerequisite is that alternative media are critical of the mainstream media and of professional journalism’s methods and set out to present an alternative. From an empirical point of view, the self-ascribed role can be identified in the way the sites write about themselves, or through interviews and public statements. In addition, Holt and colleagues (2019) argue that different forms of “alternativeness” can be studied on a micro, meso, or macro level. On a macro level, they state that the boundaries between alternative or professional can be analysed by investigating elements such as inclusion versus exclusion in press support systems, adherence to institutionalised press ethics, and membership in professional organisations. On a meso level, they suggest looking at organisations, for instance, by studying the size, structure, and business model of the sites and their particular production practices. On a micro level, the authors recommend studying the people involved by scrutinising their professional background and motivations for taking part, as well as looking at the content produced. Holt and colleagues (2019) further argue that these dimensions are not mutually constitutive and that multiple combinations of alternativeness across these dimensions are possible. Thus, a weakness of the approach is that it does not consider how to compare the different dimensions against each other, a point we will discuss in the conclusion. To assign alternatives to their proper places on the ideological left- to right-wing scale requires specific markers characteristic for right-wing or left-wing positions (Heft et al., 2020).

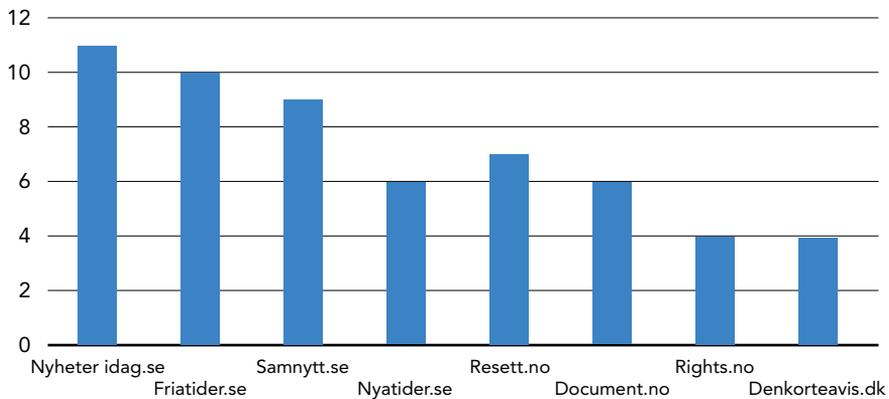
In the following, we explore key characteristics of right-wing alternative sites in a Scandinavian context and outline findings from the relatively few studies that have been conducted. We begin by referring to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2019), which provides comparative data on readership of what they term “other online news brands”. The

survey is helpful because it demonstrates how widespread the phenomenon is in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and also identifies key actors that have managed to attract an audience. It is worth mentioning that due to the low barrier of entry into the online environment, new alternative news initiatives emerge and disappear quickly. To achieve a full overview of all actors in the field is thus difficult.

Readership and trust

There are more Swedish right-wing alternative news sites included in the survey than Norwegian or Danish (see Figure 13.1) (Newman et al., 2019). This may indicate that the phenomenon is more widespread in Sweden than in the other two countries, in line with findings of other studies (Holt, 2020). The survey also shows that more people reported having heard of the Swedish sites and they have a higher number of site visitors compared to Norwegian and Danish sites (see the report for details). The reason for this disparity is difficult to know, but it may be related to the wider political and cultural context of immigration (a point to be covered in more detail in the conclusion).

Figure 13.1 Readership of key alternative news sites in Scandinavia (per cent)



Comment: The figures show reading on a weekly basis.

Source: Newman et al., 2019

Figure 13.1 shows that 11 per cent of Swedes reported that they had used *Nyheter Idag*, 10 per cent reported using *Fria Tider*, 9 per cent *Samhällsnytt*, and 6 per cent *Nya Tider*. In Norway, the study showed that 7 per cent reported weekly use of *Resett*, while the use of *Document* (6%) and *Human Rights Service* (4%) is somewhat lower. In Denmark, which has the lowest presence of right-wing-leaning alternative media, 4 per cent reported weekly use of *Den Korte Avis*.

The survey further gauged brand trust. Respondents were asked how trustworthy they considered the news received from a specific brand. A 0-point score was counted for the option “not at all trustworthy”, ranging up to 10 points for “completely trustworthy”. In all three countries, the alternative media sites included in the survey scored significantly lower than legacy news media sites among respondents who reported that they had heard of the brand. Those who had heard of the Swedish alternative media outlets scored their trustworthiness from 4.10 (*Fria Tider*) to 5.06 (*Nyheter Idag*) in contrast to the public service broadcaster SVT, which scored 6.59 points. The Norwegian outlet *Document* scored 4.70 and *Resett* 4.35, while the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, scored 7.50 points. The Danish outlet *Den Korte Avis* scored 4.64 in comparison to Danmarks Radio’s 7.68 (Newman et al., 2019). Observing trust scores given by those who routinely use the brand, the scores are clearly much higher and the differentiation between alternative and legacy news sites is much lower (for more details, see Newman et al., 2019). This reflects that stronger processes of polarisation are at play when using alternative media than when using established media.

Currently, reasons for using and engaging with alternative media in a Nordic context is to a large degree unexplored, however, international studies have indicated that political affiliation and attitudes towards immigration play a part (Ihlebak & Holter, 2020; Schulze, 2020). Some studies point out that audiences of alternative media tend to be active on social media, and consequently, alternative media sites gain relatively high scores on social media engagement (Larsson, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlebak, 2019). In a notable study conducted by Noppari and colleagues (2019), the authors suggest three profiles of right-wing alternative media users in Finland: system sceptics, agenda critics, and the casually discontent. System sceptics are characterised by a “broad systemic-level suspicion” and mistrust of elites, including journalists, who are viewed as a tool the powerful use to maintain power and repress opponents (Noppari, 2019: 29). Agenda critics share a hostile view of media elites whom they believe have a political agenda that leads to biased reporting, and that alternative media are needed to ensure diversity. They seek more dialogue and a more legitimate position in public discussions. The casually discontent think some individual journalists cause bias; this group consumes alternative news mostly to gain additional information, as well as for fun and entertainment (Noppari et al., 2019). In sum, the authors found that users of alternative media “made active, affective, and conscious choices to consume and engage with material that contradicts the agenda and views of the dominant public sphere and promoted strong ideological stances expressed via populist address” (Noppari et al., 2019: 33). They conclude that more attention should be given to the manner in which media trust and mistrust are negotiated among different user groups, and how distrust is used by some alternative media sites to mobilise particular groups of citizens.

Self-ascribed role

As outlined above, a key element in identifying right-wing alternative media is to first explore how they position themselves as an alternative, and in addition analyse ideological markers on specific sites to illuminate left-wing to right-wing positions (Heft et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2019). Empirically, this can be done through conducting interviews with those involved or through content analysis of their websites, more specifically how they describe themselves in the “about us” section or the content they produce. Also, it is possible to investigate ideological features by investigating the use of topical tags or by investigating what they write about and how it is framed. In the context of this chapter, which focuses on right-wing media, common topical tags could for instance be “immigration”, “crime”, or “media criticism” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Holt, 2016a; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Examining more closely the motivations stated on a selection of sites in each country in Scandinavia (see Table 13.1) reveals that the general tendency in all three Scandinavian countries is for such media actors to place themselves in opposition to – or as an alternative to – mainstream sources. In other words, most sites self-declare that they want to be an alternative in one way or the other – emphasising that they represent something different. However, this can be expressed in different ways and to different degrees.

Fria Tider stands out, as it does not disclose any information about its motivation. However, they have a revealing slogan connected to their subscription service, and their founder, Widar Nord, has previously argued that a principal motivation is to represent a “counterpart to the established Swedish media”, and that their strategy is to “watch what the established media do, and then do the opposite” [translated] (Nord, 2012: para. 5). Looking more into ideological features, and in particular key characteristics important to the political right, such as anti-elitism, immigration, Islam, and crime, only two outlets refer to immigration in their motivations – Norwegian *Human Rights Service* and Danish *Den Korte Avis*. The same pattern is also visible in the use of topical tags featured on the site. Looking more closely at the news published on their front pages makes it clear that many sites write extensively about immigration and crime. However, to be able to identify the actors more specifically on a right-wing to far-right scale, a more comprehensive analysis of content, frames, angles, language, and pictures is needed. This points to the importance of combining different approaches when identifying ideological positions of alternative media.

Currently, few studies have explored the motives of Scandinavian right-wing alternative media sites through interviews. An exception is the nation-specific interview study conducted by Holt (2016a). The study shows that a common motivation for editors and writers is to enlighten the Swedish public on matters they perceive as problematic and even dangerous consequences of immigration.

Table 13.1 *Self-ascribed roles of selected right-wing alternative media outlets*

	Motivation	Topical tags
Norway		
Document	To challenge the consensus-driven “established media” and to provide independent information as “the voice of freedom and reason that breaks free from the echo chamber and noise”.	foreign affairs, culture
Human Rights Service	“To collect documentation, information, and analysis to shed light on different sides in the field of immigration and integration”.	immigration, Islam, crime, women and equality, politics, statistics, free speech
Resett	“To work for democracy and freedom of speech [, ...] to be critical towards the power and fight for those who are not easily heard. This implies to criticize and be an alternative to the established media”.	foreign affairs, culture and satire, lifestyle, sports, economy
Sweden		
Fria Tider	Slogan: “Give the Swedish media the finger”.	economy, science, culture, law and order, domestic and foreign affairs, politics, media, EU, investigative
Nyheter Idag	To “report news on politics, gossip, social media and foreign news [...] based on libertarian principles”.	Sweden, politics, economy, world, culture, sports
Samhällsnytt	To “specialize in the areas where the established media exhibit omissions”.	domestic affairs, foreign affairs, culture, science
Denmark		
Den Korte Avis	“To provide a wide range of topics to their readers, including politics, economy, immigration and integration, health, social conditions, culture and foreign policy”. These topics will be covered in a “short, clear and sharp form”.	politics, crime, immigration, humans
NewSpeak Networks	To be “an independent media outlet without any hidden agendas”.	Does not use tags
24NYT	To “contribute to open up public debate that is hermetically closed in a cultural radical echo chamber”.	crime, Denmark, international

Source: Quotes taken from the “about us” section or equivalent on each website

Holt's informants claimed that mainstream media outlets are "politically correct", and that they conceal and distort negative cultural and societal aspects related to the immigration issue and to Islam. A recurring point raised in the interviews was that many alternative media actors had experienced having their op-eds and letters to editors refused by mainstream media editors, and that their postings in the comment sections of mainstream online newspapers were often removed. Thus, they created an alternative platform for the voices and viewpoints that were not represented in the mainstream media. Further, some alternative media actors admitted that they are mainly commercially motivated and that they see market potential in publishing alternative perspectives on the immigration issue. Interestingly, while the term "alternative media" has been, to some degree, adopted as a trademark by alternative media outlets, Holt (2016a) also describes a tendency to dissociate from the alternative media label to avoid being lumped with far-right outlets, such as neo-Nazi Nordfront.

Content

Another approach to explore the "alternativeness" of right-wing alternative media is to look at the content they produce and how it is presented (Holt, 2020). Professional journalism is characterised by a shared understanding of values and ethics, for instance by striving for impartial reporting (Deuze, 2005). Previous content analysis has found that while alternative sites often mimic the aesthetics of established online newspapers, they frequently blur objective news reporting with commentaries and opinions (Kenix, 2013; Wickenden & Atton, 2005). Also, even though alternative media in general share a deep mistrust of the mainstream media, research suggests that they often depend heavily on content from the established media, which they reframe and decontextualise by making small amendments (Ekman, 2018; Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2018; Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017).

There are few comparative content analyses of right-wing alternative media conducted in a Scandinavian context. A study by Nygaard (2019) compares the Norwegian alternative media outlet *Document*, Swedish *Fria Tider*, and Danish *Den Korte Avis*, and illuminates differences among the three outlets concerning how subjective they allow themselves to be in their news reporting. Although all three alternative media attempts to convince their audiences that Scandinavian societies have become unsafe, linking immigration to increased crime rates, they use quite different strategies to convey this message. The Swedish and Danish outlets represent opposite extremes: The former address the public mainly through a descriptive news-genre style, while the latter promote their perspectives on immigration dogmatically through opinions. The Norwegian case falls somewhere in between. Nygaard (2019) concludes that it seemed

important for the Swedish and Norwegian outlets to borrow credibility from the mainstream media by giving the appearance of objectivity through using a descriptive news-genre style.

Some national studies have also analysed the content of right-wing alternative media sites. A study by Holt (2016b) compares the content and style of Swedish alternative media with professional mainstream media. He found variations in the following key points: first, results suggested a much narrower topical scope in alternative media outlets, focusing on issues such as politics, social issues, crime, war, and conflicts; second, the alternative media articles were characterised by a considerably more negative tone and more critical perspectives. Another nation-specific study conducted by Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) showed that media criticism is a common feature in Norwegian alternative news sites. They qualitatively analysed how journalistic authority was questioned and challenged in a variety of far-right alternative media outlets, ranging from right-wing to far-right extremist sites. In the study, the authors found that common forms of media criticism across extremist and moderate sites are claims that journalists are lazy, stupid, and biased, and that they mislead audiences about the threats of immigration, a finding that mirrors Holt's studies. While the sites in question engage frequently in media criticism, self-criticism was non-existent. In their study, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) identify five positions used to ascribe authority to themselves as media critics: the insider position points to experience in the professional journalism field that some alternative journalists have; the expert position builds factual legitimacy by referring to extensive statistics and facts about immigration; the victim position attributes the source of their knowledge to personal and negative experiences with professional journalism; the citizen position is used to legitimise the claim that professional journalists have become too removed from ordinary people; and the activist position points to experiences of direct physical confrontation with professional journalists – a view promoted by extreme actors. The study indicates that the strategy of alternative media actors is to frame their media criticism from multitude angles.

Organisational features

Another dimension of illuminating differences between professional and alternative media is to consider organisational features. A media organisation “creates, modifies, produces, and distributes content to many receivers” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Legacy media organisations are owned predominantly by large national or transnational media houses, and their aim is twofold: to generate profits for their owners through particular business models, and to fulfil democratic goals by promoting an informed citizenry, functioning as the fourth estate. Established media organisations are traditionally structured hierarchically,

independent from political interference, and characterised by specific editorial practices and journalistic routines founded on a set of ethics and values. In this regard, media organisations function as an important arena in which journalists become socialised into a “shared journalistic ideology” (Deuze, 2005; Hovden et al., 2016). Alternative media organisations are often run by activists, organised according to non-hierarchical participatory principles, and dependent on voluntary work and alternative funding models (Atton, 2002a; Hamilton, 2000). Their aim can be commercially oriented, but the rise of left-wing alternative media in the 1980s was largely motivated by the need to break with the commercial logic of the news media that, they argued, favoured elitist and capitalist interests. It is again necessary to stress that, due to the digital transformation, established media organisations have restructured their organisational models, and new online natives have successfully entered the market. Thus, it is useful to take into account a more hybrid understanding of what a media organisation is, identifying both similarities and differences across a mainstream–alternative continuum (Atton, 2002b; Harcup, 2005; Kenix, 2013).

Among the leading outlets in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, there are huge differences with regard to organisational features in the amount of information available on their online sites (see Table 13.2). Generally, Danish outlets disclose fewer staff members, and apparently there are more fluid dynamics in the Danish sphere because the outlets have a shorter lifespan than Norwegian and Swedish outlets. *Den Korte Avis*, considered the only well-established outlet, discloses only two staff members, while the leading actors in Norway and Sweden disclose up to ten staff members.

Regarding funding of alternative media outlets, the overview suggests that advertising, user donations, and subscriptions, or a combination of these, are the most common. This illustrates how alternative media seem to adopt the commercial logics of the legacy media, pointing to the blurry boundaries between the two. In Norway and Denmark, however, left-wing activists have repeatedly warned corporations not to advertise on such outlets via Twitter, which has led a substantial number of corporations to boycott the outlets. Thus, alternative business models, such as user donations, are necessary. Furthermore, the Norwegian outlet *Human Rights Service*, established in 2001 as a think tank to improve integration and to promote universal democratic rights, stands out by receiving direct government subsidies annually since 2005 to promote integration. As the outlet is regarded as a key actor within the right-wing alternative media sphere in recent years, retaining these government subsidies is highly controversial and regularly debated in the public sphere. Despite this controversy, one of its editors was a regular columnist for the Oslo-based broad-sheet *Aftenposten* for several years, underscoring the blurry boundaries between mainstream and alternative media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Table 13.2 Organisational features of selected right-wing alternative media

	Established	Staff members disclosed	Business model
Norway			
Document	2003	10+	Advertising and user donations
Human Rights Service	2001	2	State support and user donations
Resett	2017	10	Advertising, subscriptions, and user donations
Sweden			
Fria Tider	2009	–	Advertising and subscriptions
Nyheter Idag	2014	7	Advertising and subscriptions
Samhällsnytt	2017	9+	Advertising and user donations
Denmark			
Den Korte Avis	2012	2	Advertising and user donations
NewSpeak Networks	2015	–	Advertising and user donations
24NYT	2017	1	Advertising and user donations

As mentioned above, scholarly literature highlights “deprofessionalisation”, that is, that people involved in alternative media practices are more often than not amateurs with little or no professional journalism training (Hamilton, 2000). Among the Swedish alternative media outlets, this holds true, as it seems that most people involved do not have experience in professional journalism. In Norway and Denmark, however, some key actors behind or employed by *Document*, *Human Rights Service*, *Resett*, *Den Korte Avis*, *NewSpeak Networks*, and *24NYT* have wide experience in professional journalism, including in leading national news organisations, such as Norwegian *VG* and *TV 2*, and Danish *Jyllands-Posten* and *Ekstrabladet*. The married couple behind Danish *Den Korte Avis*, Karen Jespersen and Ralf Pittelkow, both have professional backgrounds in mainstream media and as high-profile social democratic politicians. Jespersen has even served as a minister for both the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. This illustrates the aforementioned blurring of boundaries – some professional journalists do indeed choose to work for alternative sites, but there is currently no research that has elucidated this phenomenon properly, nor its consequences for journalistic practices in the Scandinavian context.

Another point for discussion is that Swedish alternative media representatives often have dubious reputations concerning independence, as many of them have various connections to the right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (Herkman & Jungar, Chapter 12). For instance, the domain names for both *Nyheter Idag* and *Avpixlat*, the predecessor to *Samhällsnytt*, were originally registered by then member of parliament for the Sweden Democrats, Kent Ekeröth. Ekeröth is widely known for his involvement in the “iron pipe scandal” in 2010, in which three top politicians representing the party armed themselves with iron pipes from a construction site while committing a verbal racial attack on a comedian (Expressen, 2012). Ekeröth’s involvement in these outlets has been the subject of controversy and repeated mainstream media attention. However, *Nyheter Idag*’s website states that the outlet does not have direct ties to any political organisations. Because any connection to the Sweden Democrats is perceived as highly controversial in Sweden, at least among its opponents, due to its roots in fascism, it is likely that these connections contribute to the constantly recurring portrayals of Swedish alternative media outlets as ideological deviants in the Swedish mainstream media. In Denmark, *Den Korte Avis* does not appear to have affiliations to any political party, while the founder of *NewSpeak Networks* and *24NYT*, Jeppe Juhl, has links to the Danish radical right party, the New Right, although in May 2019, Juhl claimed that he is no longer involved with these outlets (Andersen, 2019).

Relations with professional media organisations and press ethics

Yet another approach to exploring alternative media is to look at the media system and how the boundaries are set through institutional mechanisms (Skogerbø et al., Chapter 1). As pointed out by several scholars, the Nordic media model is characterised by strong press organisations, institutionalised self-regulation, editorial freedom, a high level of journalistic professionalism and autonomy, generous press support systems, and cultural policies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Jensen, 2016; Nord, 2008; Ohlsson, 2015; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Following a media system approach, it is possible to pinpoint certain key actors that play important parts in defining and maintaining the boundaries of journalism at the institutional level: media politicians or bureaucrats who play a role in defining who should be eligible for press support; press organisations, such as unions for journalists or associations for editors or media businesses; and the regulatory boards administering complaints brought against breaches of institutionalised ethical codes. Focusing on the latter, a key feature of Nordic media is the self-regulation system, whereby the press polices the press. This implies that professional journalism as an institution has agreed on a set of

rules that the entire profession accepts (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, the role of the media councils is to determine whether a complaint is justified and, if so, to sanction the publication in question by having it publish the media council's statement (Syvertsen et al., 2014) and make a public apology in order to restore public trust. In Norway, The Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press is enforced by The Press Complaints Council, funded by the main press organisations, and complaints can be made against members of the umbrella organisation, The Norwegian Press Association. In Sweden, The Code of Ethics for Press, Radio and Television is enforced by The Press Ombudsman. Newspapers, magazines, and online publications that are part of The Swedish Media Publishers' Association, The Magazine Publishers' Association, or alternately, online media that have applied for membership in The Ethical Press System, are included in the voluntary system. In Denmark, The Danish Press Council enforces The Press Ethical Rules that are part of The Media Liability Act. In a Scandinavian context, we posit that membership in professional organisations and inclusion in the self-regulatory system represent an important boundary-marker in the media field.

Looking at some right-wing alternative media sites in each country, we find that some abide by the ethics rules but most do not. It is, of course, important to note that professing loyalty to a Code of Ethics and abiding by it in everyday practice is not necessarily the same thing. More studies are needed to address how ethics are perceived and internalised by alternative news organisations. In Sweden, *Nyheter Idag* is registered with the self-regulatory system of the Swedish press and thus have agreed to abide by the ethical codes of conduct, while *Sambällsnytt*, *Fria Tider*, and *Nya Tider* have not. In Denmark, none of the key alternative media actors are registered with Pressenævnet, the institution that deals with complaints concerning mainstream media's adherence to the ethical codes of conduct. In Norway, a public debate arose concerning who should be included in the self-regulatory system. Before March 2018, a Norwegian news outlet that stated its adherence to the ethical guidelines was included in the system; however, The Norwegian Press Association changed their statutes so only members of professional media organisations associated with the Norwegian Press Association – and who, in effect, contributed financially to the self-regulatory system – could be included. This alteration was done to protect the credibility of the media institutions, editors, and journalists who commit to the ethical guidelines (The Norwegian Press Association, 2019). By changing the self-regulatory system, the Norwegian Press Association effectively managed to strengthen the boundaries on an institutional level. Following this change, however, two editors of right-wing alternative media outlets applied to become members of the Association of Norwegian Editors, which would automatically lead to their inclusion in the self-regulatory system. In June 2018, the editor of *Document*, Hans Rustad, was accepted as a member. In contrast, the editor

of *Resett*, Helge Lurås, was denied membership twice. The decision was based on three aspects: the fact that *Resett* had offered a source substantial money to share a story about a young man's sexual encounter with a female politician; a lack of moderation in the comment section; and their ongoing campaign and calls for boycotts against mainstream media outlets. The case is interesting because it points to how boundaries are drawn and negotiated, but also the fluidity in the field where alternative actors can move towards – or potentially also further away from – the mainstream.

Finally, exploring mainstream media reactions to right-wing alternative media can help enhance our understanding of the boundaries between the two. Although research on this matter is still scarce, Nygaard (2020) has demonstrated through a content analysis how Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish mainstream news organizations tend to portray right-wing alternative media as journalistically and ideologically deviant in order to protect the boundaries of professional journalism as well as the limits of acceptable public debate from actors they deem illegitimate. As the distance between mainstream and alternative media is also dependent on mainstream media reactions to their emergence, more research on the mainstream/alternative continuum should take the mainstream media as a starting point.

Conclusion: Challenges for research on alternative media

In this chapter, we have explored the role of right-wing alternative media, arguing that such news providers constitute a relatively modest, but nevertheless distinct, actor in the Scandinavian political communication landscape. Statistics indicate that the phenomenon is more widespread in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. The exact reasons for this remain unclear, but the political and cultural context point to some possible explanations. Because immigration is recognised as a driving force for right-wing alternative media, it is relevant that policies towards immigration and integration differ historically in the three countries. Sweden was first in Scandinavia to become a destination for immigrants and has generally been the most liberal, in terms of access and integration (Brochmann et al., 2012). The populist right-wing party, the Sweden Democrats, is highly critical of immigration and has long been excluded from coalitions through a political cordon sanitaire, while in the other two countries, similar parties take a more prominent role (Wettstein et al., 2018). In this regard, Brochmann and colleagues (2012) argue that a critical public debate on the challenges and problems relating to immigration and multiculturalism has been less present in Sweden. This may have opened a market for right-wing alternative media that focuses more vocally and provocatively on the negative aspects of immigration (Holt, 2016a). Heft and colleagues (2020) further

suggest that the lower supply of alternative media in Denmark may be related to the Danish mainstream media context, which is favourable to right-wing actors, in the sense that it allows politically incorrect issues and positions to a greater extent. One must of course be cautious when speculating about cause and effect, especially when comparative studies are scarce. There is a danger of reducing complex matters to simplified conclusions, and more research is needed to explore how political, social, and cultural dimensions influence the role and impact of right-wing alternative media in the Nordic sphere.

We have pointed to certain difficulties in terms of how to conceptualise alternative media actors. Holt and colleagues (2019) suggest a relational and non-normative definition, which is helpful in separating alternative media from the left-wing social movements' perspective. They emphasise the need to look into how alternative media describe and position themselves in opposition to the mainstream, but also how "alternative" can be used as a label by others – even though this is less developed in their framework. In addition, they suggest that "the alternativeness" can be studied analytically on micro, meso, and macro levels by looking at content, practices, organisational features, and relations to professional media organisations and press ethics. Heft and colleagues (2020) furthermore argue that in order to categorise alternative sites as coming from a right-wing to a far-right ideological position, it is necessary to identify ideological markers in their motivations, use of topical tags, and how they frame their stories.

Inspired by these perspectives, we explored a selection of right-wing alternative media in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. We looked at their self-ascribed roles and ideological positions, as well as referring to studies that characterise the content, organisational features, and their relation to institutionalised press ethics. We argue that although many right-wing media sites clearly position themselves as being in opposition – or an alternative – to mainstream media, this is expressed and framed in different ways and to different degrees. Further, we argue that it can be difficult to place such actors on the right-wing to far-right scale without conducting in-depth interview studies or systematic content analysis. Empirical evidence from the Swedish context shows that people involved in alternative media tend to dissociate from the "immigration-critical alternative media" label to avoid being confused with far-right outlets (Holt, 2016a). Thus, there are indications of an ongoing adaptation process, as the distinction between mainstream and alternative media is increasingly difficult to discern.

Another dimension of alternativeness is in its organisational features. In this chapter, we show that the selected sites are dependent predominantly on volunteer work and alternative business models. This varies if the people involved come from professional or activist backgrounds; most alternative media organisations consist of a mix of the two. Some actors in Norwegian and Danish alternative media have extensive experience in professional journalism, including in leading national news institutions. A Norwegian study shows that this

insider knowledge is used to criticise the way professional journalists conduct their jobs (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018). Our findings point out the complex and fluid relationship between right-wing alternative media sites and professional organisations, press ethics, and the self-regulatory system. We posit that this dimension affords a very strong boundary marker of professionalism in the Nordic media system and consequently should be emphasised when categorising alternative media. Our overview shows that most right-wing alternative media do not adhere to professional ethical codes, which is not surprising based on their self-ascribed role as standing in opposition and serving as media critics. However, some sites do claim adherence to professional norms.

Using a multi-level approach to study alternative media, it is necessary to clarify how different dimensions should be weighed against each other. To illustrate, the Norwegian site *Document*, established in 2003, which clearly positions itself as an alternative to the mainstream press, is nevertheless a member of the Association of Norwegian Editors and part of the press ethics system. They have what seems to be a stable number of writers, some with a background in professional journalism. There has not been a systematic, long-term analysis of the content they produce; however, a study by Nygaard (2019) suggests that *Document* sometimes mixes news and views. This somewhat paradoxical situation points to the need for future research to shed light on how the different dimensions of alternativeness is given value in order to function as a reliable analytical tool, and also on what level comparative research should be conducted (see Heft et al., 2020). It also points to the necessity of being aware of methodological and analytical challenges when studying a moving target with imprecise boundaries.

Finally, a point for discussion is that the distance between mainstream and alternative media depends not only on how alternative outlets describe themselves but also on how they are perceived and received by the mainstream media and broader public sphere. To better understand how boundaries are constructed and challenged in the media field, future research should investigate how and by whom such distinctions are drawn and when they change. Certain social actors, especially news media professionals and academics, have been the ones who define what is news and journalism and what is not. As the journalistic field increasingly must play by the rules of the technological field, it is pertinent to ask who decides where the centre and the periphery of the profession are (Tandoc, 2019). Our findings show that audiences of alternative media tend to actively engage on social media and, consequently, news and views from alternative media gain relatively high scores on social media engagement when compared to mainstream online newspapers. If legacy media organizations are losing ground to social media platforms, it is equally important to understand how the audience understand the boundaries between professional journalism and new digital entrants to the profession, such as alternative media, because it is not at all certain that legacy media sources occupies a central position in audiences everyday news consumption.

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