

Debate

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Copycats or integrative innovators?

A proposal for the assessment of »alternative media«

Abstract: Today, »alternative media« is used as an umbrella term for a variety of different media products. Some of them simply aim to inject new topics and information into the public discourse of civil society, while others disseminate content that fuels hate against certain groups. Some online media leverage participatory formats, others are more traditional, one-way channels. The emergence of alternative media is closely associated with the New Social Movements that first emerged in the 1970s. One of the hypotheses in this contribution is that New Right media are merely copying the successful concept of alternative media. In this contribution, the author proposes a first draft for a catalogue of criteria to help classify »alternative media«, using actor-related, organizational, and content-related criteria.

»Alternative media« are currently getting a bad rap, being perceived in the same vein as Donald Trump's »alternative facts«. German right-wing party »Alternative für Deutschland«, for example, recommends using primarily »alternative media« as they believe that »state television and the full-of-gaps media« convey inadequate information (AfDBayern). Those who use the term »alternative media« today imply that the »mainstream media« are not living up to their mission of providing the general public with information and create a public forum. This way, right-wing populist groups methodically hijack a concept that originally had a completely different meaning.

The term »alternative media« for civic urban newspapers and citizen-run radios dates back to the 70s of the 20th century. From the beginning, it has been a fuzzy term that encompasses a multitude of media formats. Now, right-wing extremist portals such as *Altermedia*, the FPÖ-associated portal *unzensuriert.at*,

or the right-wing populist blog PI-News have claimed the term for themselves. As a consequence, these and other media, like *Nachdenkseiten*, Ken Jebsen's video channel, *Rubikon*, *NuoViso*, or *RT Deutsch* are all lumped together and often labeled as »conspiracist« by various actors, from communication or political science publications to websites devoted to religious or journalistic practice and media criticism.

In this contribution, the author proposes a first draft of a catalogue of criteria to help classify »alternative media«: Are they participatory formats encouraging citizens' participation? Or are they PR machines with their own agenda? Who controls the platforms they use, what is their media policy framework? Is the use of such media truly innovative and integrative? What are the goals of the producers of such »alternative« media? For context, I will now retrace a quick history of alternative media from the 1970s to the present day.

Definitions and state of research

Overall, it is noticeable that until about 2010, the innovative and integrative power of alternative media was assessed rather optimistically, especially with regard to the Web 2.0. No later than 2015, however, journalism studies as well as communication and other social sciences began pivoting towards more pessimistic assessments as they witnessed the rise of Pegida, the AfD, and a popularization of the term »lying press.

Heinz Bonfadelli points out that many publications on the impact of media publics, such as the »formation of a shared topic agenda in civil society, the diffusion of shared knowledge, or influence on the public or public opinion« (Bonfadelli 2019) are based on normative assumptions that can go both ways – in a positive as well as a negative direction. The assumption is that both centripetal and centrifugal effects are at work, and both can be interpreted positively or negatively.

Bonfadelli states the hypothesis of a growing knowledge gap: As the flow of information on a topic in a society increases, knowledge about it does not spread evenly throughout society. Instead, the knowledge gaps between the different social segments with their varying degrees of educational and intellectual affinity deepen further (cf. Bonfadelli 2019). He contrasts this negative view with the positive uses-and-gratifications approach: »In contrast, the uses-and-gratifications approach considers it positive that people consume and use media actively and purposefully in a variety of ways, emphasizing the interactive participatory potential of online communication and Web 2.0.« (Bonfadelli 2019)

From this, we could derive as a criterion the ability and willingness of a civil society medium to integrate into the general public.

Writing from a political science angle, Ulrich Sarcinelli states that »access to the media has become easier for non-established actors, but reaching a mass public for all is more difficult due to a larger and more compartmentalized media offering« (Sarcinelli 2008). This could explain a growing resentment among right-wing populists and their supporters that their own »alternative media« sometimes achieve great reach, yet in their opinion, traditional media do not cover them enough, or not at all. The question is to what degree that is really intentional.

On several occasions, Sven Engesser and Jeffrey Wimmer have addressed the question where the counter-public falls in the publicity concepts of communication science (cf. Engesser/Wimmer 2009). They consider the various levels of participatory forms and formats to be a constitutive element. The different degrees of participation can be differentiated by their respective degree of responsibility (cf. Hooffacker 2018).

»Citizen Journalism« is another term that may cause confusion, as Christoph Neuberger has noted (see Neuberger 2012). Steve Outing uses a broader concept of Citizen Journalism. »Outing includes the entire range of journalistically relevant communication by non-professionals, also in the context of professional journalistic media.« (as cited in Hooffacker 2018)

In its narrower sense, as defined by Joyce Y. M. Nip, Citizen Journalism is the production of news by citizens independently from professional journalism. We must thus distinguish between participatory formats offered within the framework of traditional mass media and participation offered via the actor's own media. Early on, the »alternative press« of the 1970s demanded that the conception, creation, and production of »alternative« media products be left entirely in the hands of civil society actors (see Hooffacker/Lokk 1989). This, too, provides us with criteria to classify alternative media.

A quick trip back in time

The following section is an abridged excerpt from a 1989 handbook, which the author published together with Peter Lokk as a guide for high school, college, and city newspapers (cf. Hooffacker/Lokk 2009).

After 1945, US-style student newspapers began to emerge in West Germany as a result of Allied re-education efforts. From the early 1960s, leaflets, newspapers, and magazines by high school and college students became a political medium. A plethora of micro- and alternative newspapers cropped up in the German-speaking world as student revolts took to the streets. In 1974, Peter Engel and W. Christian Schmitt identified about 250 alternative newspaper for the period since 1965 (cf. Engel/Schmitt 1974). In 1986, the alternative press directory, published

by the »Information Service for Unreported News« (ID) listed approximately 600 newspapers and magazines with more or less regular publication intervals (cf. Diederich/Schindowski 1986).

City newspapers, such as the *Blatt* in Munich, *Klenkes* in Cologne, or *De Schtüss* in Bonn, all emerged in the 1970s and explicitly saw themselves as a counter-public, as is evident in their moniker »Stattzeitungen«, a pun on the homophones »Stadt« – city, and »Statt« – instead, or alternatively. They reached circulations of up to 20,000 copies. Their purpose was to provide a forum for groups that received no coverage by the local press. »The topics they covered thus also became acceptable to the established press: from the nation's inept grappling with its Nazi past to environmentalism and the anti-nuclear movement. Specialization set in, leading to the creation of separate magazines for the women's movement, renters' associations, environmental and ecological groups, etc.« (Hooffacker/Lokk 2009).

Since the 1980s, this »grass-roots counter-public« has extended to other media. Alternative radio stations such as *Radio Dreieckland* in Freiburg or *Radio Z* in Nuremberg, often supported by an association, emerged as »community media«. In various federal states, citizens' stations were enshrined in law and endowed with solid financial resources (see Förster 2017). Concepts of public and counter-public from the same period in the GDR have not yet been sufficiently researched and received (cf. Meyen 2013, 2019).

It was pioneers from the hacker scene alongside representatives of the alternative press who first leveraged data networks and online platforms. In the US, it was *The Well*, which originated from a handbook of alternative projects (cf. Rheingold 1994). In West Germany, mailbox networks emerged, such as the *Computernetzwerk Linksysteme* (CL-Netz), a partner of the international »Association for Progressive Communications« (APC). City newspapers and other citizen media used this network to interconnect (see Hooffacker/Lokk 2009). »Alternative« topics and media formats then found their way into the traditional media, while alternative media gradually faded into insignificance (cf. Hooffacker 2008).

Like a distorted mirror image, the innovative media projects by a critical counter-public are always followed by media projects by backward-looking, right-wing to right-extremist media producers. They adopt these media forms and formats and fill them with authoritative content. One characteristic of their messaging is hatred against specific groups (cf. Heitmeyer 2002-2011) combined with current elements of pop culture.

During the heyday of high-school newspapers, extremist right-wing leaflets of the same type were distributed in front of schools. »Right-wing rock music« was propagated as a counterpart to progressive rock music, followed by »schoolyard CDs« which were distributed free of charge. The right-wing extremist Thulenetz, set up with financial support from the German constitutional intelligence

service (see Aust/Laabs 2014), set out to copy the open and, at the time, successful mailbox networks such as the CL network (see Hooffacker/Lokk 1997). Right-wing extremist websites followed.

Currently, right-wing content is often distributed in the forums, groups, chats, and messenger services of third-party platforms – from Facebook to YouTube, Reddit, Discord, or Telegram.

To the author's bewilderment, right-wing groups are often given credit for using these media innovatively. Given the omnipresence of the internet (which is about 30 years old), of Web 2.0 (almost 20 years old) as well as the smartphone (which has been around for more than a decade), it no longer seems appropriate to speak of »new media«. The new right-wing media producers are rather »copycats« of the alternative media.

Criteria for alternative media

There is extensive research on the topic of the internet and participation, for which Christoph Neuberger developed theoretical foundations (cf. Neuberger 2007, 2010, 2014). Amongst more recent communication science publications, we should mention Wolfgang Schweiger (Schweiger 2017); for political science, Kathrin Voss (Voss 2014). »Social« networks are often generally regarded as a platform for alternative media (see Hauser, Opilowski/Wyss 2019).

As early as 2011, Marisol Sandoval warned against making participation the only defining criterion of alternative media because participation is not always emancipatory, not even on the internet. Like Engesser and Wimmer (Engesser/Wimmer 2009: 45), she points out the existence of right-wing extremist online portals. While Engesser and Wimmer focus primarily on structural criteria, Sandoval also includes messaging in addition to economic criteria, defining alternative media as critical media (see Sandoval 2011).

Anyone looking at media products as diverse as Ken Jebsen's video channel *KenFM*, *Nachdenkseiten*, *PI-News* or *Rubikon* will soon notice that these criteria fully or partially apply to »new« as well as »old« alternative media, to »left-wing« as well as »right-wing«, to educative as well as backward-looking or right-wing populist media. The decisive factor here is how the term »critical« is filled with meaning. For example, Pegida protesters or AfD have repeatedly been described as »asylum-policy critics«, participants at protests against pandemic mitigation measures have been labeled as »Corona critics«. The usefulness of the term »critical recipients« is therefore limited.

The jury conferring the »Alternative Media Award« also faced the challenge of defining alternative media. Awarded since 2000, this prize was established by members of Germany's alternative scene (city newspapers, community radios).

Table 1:
Characteristics of alternative media

| | | Commercial mainstream media | Ideal-typical alternative media |
|------------|-------------------------|--|--|
| Structures | Economic product format | Commercial product | Non-commercial media product |
| | Content | Tendency to offer ideological contents | Government-critical contents |
| Actors | Recipients | Many recipients | Critical recipients |
| | Producers | Few producers | Critical producers |

Characteristics of alternative media according to Sandoval (2011)

The recipients of the Alternative Media Award have been as diverse media as *Nachdenkseiten* (2009), innovative pieces from independent radio stations, such as the action format Radioballet (2003), Y-Kollektiv for Skandal bei Eliteinheit KSK (2018), Andrea Röpke (multiple awards since 2009), Markus Beckedahl for *netzpolitik.org* (2010), or Peter Ohlendorf's film *Blut muss fließen* (Blood Must Flow) on right-wing extremist concerts, as well as multiple awards for special media-critical contributions (Patrick Gensing, Walter van Rossum, Tom Schimmek). Scandal erupted in 2017 when the jury awarded a prize to a report on Ramstein published by NuoViso (Alternativer_Medienpreis 200off.). Frequently, the award-winning contributions also include documentary films or web documentaries produced with funding from public broadcasters.

The award criteria are a blend of structural and messaging aspects. Commercial media are explicitly included. Entries must meet only one of the criteria to be eligible.

The examples show: We still lack a concise definition of alternative media. In order to exclude authoritarian, conformist, or regressive concepts of humanity, we must resort to sociological and messaging categories. For example, Henkelmann et al. examine the sociology of »conformist rebels« based on the construct of an authoritarian character (cf. Henkelmann, Jäckel, Stahl, Wünsch/Zopes 2020).

Oliver Nachtwey coined the term »regressive rebel« (cf. Nachtwey/Heumann 2019). Supporters of current right-wing populist tendencies are assigned to a profoundly backward-looking, authoritarian world view. For one, they are disappointed by what they perceive as a »weakness« of the state. At the same time, they feel that they, as a group, are being degraded and that their rights and liberties are under threat.

Nachtwey characterizes their relationship with the media and the public as follows: »The socio-political practices of regressive rebels revolve around criti-

Eligibility requirements of the Alternative Media Award

Eligible is anyone who performs journalistic work for

- non-commercial media,
- media evolved from new social movements,
- traditional media,
- media whose mission is emancipatory.

Submissions should meet at least one of the following criteria:

- present a topic across media, for example print / online or radio / online,
- implement innovative formats of print, audio, video or online journalism,
- address a topic that is neglected by larger media,
- intensively and critically address social grievances,
- address Germany's National Socialist past and its repercussions on the present day.

From the eligibility requirements (Alternativer_Medienpreis 2000ff.)

cizing the media and the public. Distorted reporting by the mainstream media (especially on AfD and on issues of migration and domestic policy) turns into the front line of ideological debate. The crisis of representation is also a crisis of established knowledge, which is why conspiracy and delusion are popular social diagnoses for regressive rebels.« (Nachtwey/Heumann 2019)

It is debatable whether these currents are really looking for »unconventional ways« to reach the public, as Nachtwey and Heumann write, or whether they are actually using quite conventional means (website, blog, Facebook, YouTube etc.). The final paragraph of this article will present a first attempt at classification.

Draft of a catalog of criteria to assess alternative media

What are the proper criteria to classify and evaluate alternative media? I propose a categorization by actors, organization, and content. In terms of content, key criteria would be their innovative power in terms of topics and formats, whether the medium sows hatred towards certain groups (Wilhelm Heitmeyer), whether it represents an authoritarian, regressive concept of humanity, and finally, whether its aim is to integrate into the civic public or not. The following table provides an initial overview:

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Actor-related | Media designed entirely by non-professionals |
| | Curated participatory forms and formats by non-professionals in professional media |
| | Contributions by professional journalists |
| Organizational | Channel owned and organized by non-professionals |
| | Dedicated professional channel |
| | Channel of a professional medium |
| | Channel of an organization (PR channel) |
| Content-related | Innovative topic setting |
| | Innovative format |
| | No hatred towards specific groups |
| | No authoritarian, regressive concept of humanity |
| | Objective is to integrate into the civic public (centripetal) |

The table can be used as a matrix. The following is an attempt to evaluate different media forms and formats that are labelled »alternative media«. For practical reasons, I selected four media with a large reach that are often described as »populist« or »conspiratorial«, which each present different characteristics: *Nachdenkseiten*, Ken Jebsen’s YouTube channel *KenFM*, *PI-News*, and *RT deutsch*.

| | | <i>Nachdenkseiten</i> | <i>KenFM</i> | <i>PI-News</i> | <i>RT deutsch</i> |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Actor-related | Media designed entirely by non-professionals | - | - | - | - |
| | Curated participatory forms and formats by non-professionals in professional media | + | - | + | - |
| | Contributions by professional journalists | + | + | +(?) | + |
| Organizational | Channel owned and organized by non-professionals | + | - | - | - |
| | Dedicated professional channel | - | + | + | - |
| | Channel of a professional medium | - | + | - | - |
| | Channel of an organization (PR channel) | - | - | -(?) | + |

| | <i>Nachdenkseiten</i> | <i>KenFM</i> | <i>PI-News</i> | <i>RT deutsch</i> | |
|------------------------|---|--------------|----------------|-------------------|-------|
| Content-related | Innovative topic setting | + | + | - | + |
| | Innovative format | - | + | - | - |
| | No hatred towards specific groups | + | - | - | + |
| | No authoritarian, regressive concept of humanity | + | - | - | + (?) |
| | Objective is to integrate into civic public (centripetal) | + | - (?) | - | + |

Both the actor-related and organizational, but especially the content-related criteria are merely an initial, superficial classification. It would take a content analysis to provide empirical proof. Since such an analysis would exceed the scope of this article, some points must remain open for the time being.

A key criterion in communication science would be the crucial question: What is your stance towards the general public? Do the groups and their media prefer to remain in their respective sub-publics and reinforce centrifugal tendencies, or is their objective to integrate into a shared civic public? Key knockout criteria for this would be hatred towards specific groups, such as Islamophobia, and an authoritarian regressive concept of humanity, such as that of some »Corona rebels«.

Once the catalogue of criteria is further differentiated, it could facilitate more precise descriptions of »alternative media«, or even of individual articles, rather than generally describing them as »populist« or »conspiracist«.

We are also not yet able to categorize traditional alternative media according to this catalog. How would we classify citizen radios, fully participatory forums, or city newspapers? The results would probably be as colorful and diverse as the different scenes themselves.

Overall, of course, the table won't tell us whether we are dealing with an alternative medium in the traditional sense or a medium offering »alternative facts«. However, we hope that this overview might facilitate a first attempt at classifying and evaluating these media. It remains to be studied whether this categorization will be suitable for further use.

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