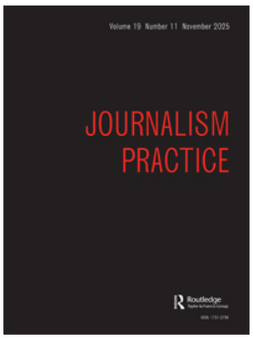

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Challengers to Journalism: Alternative Media Editors' Framing of Editorial Values and Practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines alternative media through the lens of journalism as a strategic action field. Drawing on in-depth interviews with editors of alternative media in Norway, we explore how they frame their editorial values and practices as "challengers" to mainstream journalism. By talking to the actors in question, it is possible to attain an empirically grounded understanding of the frailties, strengths, and in-built paradoxes of contemporary alternative news media projects. In the paper, we point out that the peripheral position of alternative media results in limited privileges and access, thereby constraining their scope of action. However, it also offers the potential to redefine the established rules of the field in innovative and unconventional ways, challenging existing power dynamics. The success of alternative media hinges on their ability to garner support by effectively communicating in ways that resonate with other social actors. This paper first highlights how alternative media editors position themselves using two primary frames: victimhood and exceptionalism. These frames operate symbiotically as they articulate key editorial values such as independence, boldness, authenticity, and thoroughness. Secondly, the study identifies how these editorial values are embedded in the framing of journalistic practices, including production, distribution, and engagement.

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Alternative media; victimhood; exceptionalism; field; journalism; editorial values; practice; frames

Introduction

Alternative news media represent a variety of content producers that share an ambition to act as a corrective to the perceived hegemonic power of the mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). The broader processes of digitalization and globalization have lowered the threshold for new peripheral journalistic actors to produce news that bears resemblance to journalism (see Carlson 2017; Eldridge 2018; Maares and Hanusch 2023; Reese 2021). This implies a diversification of news production and potential blurring of lines between mainstream and alternative values and practices (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Kenix 2011). While alternative media have traditionally been closely linked with social movement theory and the prospect of empowerment of ordinary citizens (Atton 2001; Fuchs 2010), alternative media today is often associated with antagonism,

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hyper-partisanship and hostile media criticism. The position and impact of alternative media varies across media systems (Heft et al. 2020; Ihlebæk et al. 2022; Mayerhöffer, Kristensen, and Ramsland 2024), yet the compelling impact of far-right alternative media networks in US politics has established the impression of alternative media as a destructive force undermining media and political institutions in popular and scholarly debates (see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Reese 2021),

While several studies have scrutinized the content, distribution, and audiences of alternative media, there is still a lack of studies illuminating the values and tactics of those engaged in alternative media projects, particularly those representing the far-right (see Eldridge 2018, 2019; Holt 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023; and Mayerhöffer 2021, for similar criticism). In this article, we argue that to understand their mobilizing power it is necessary to critically investigate and analyze how alternative media frame their positions and practices. We do this by studying alternative media as *challengers* in a strategic action field (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024a). This analytical perspective is concerned with scrutinizing forces of stability and change in a field and emphasizes how social actors, including incumbents (i.e., established media organizations), governance units (i.e., press organizations) and challengers, engage in recurring contentions. Challengers normally occupy a less privileged position in the field and consequently have limited material and symbolic resources. In certain conditions, however, challengers can use the rules of the field in new unconventional and unintended ways to destabilize existing power dynamics, create disruptions, and even create new fields. To gain influence, social actors are dependent on *social skills*, which according to strategic action field theory comprises the ability to induce cooperation and support by communicating in a way that resonates with others (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Studying social skills then is to empirically investigate how actors position themselves in the field, how they frame their projects to mobilize support, and what actions are employed to achieve collaboration and support. More specifically we ask: *How do alternative media frame their position as challengers through representations of editorial values and practices?*

This paper relies on in-depth interviews with editors and senior editorial staff in a variety of alternative media projects in Norway. By talking to the actors in question, it is possible to attain an empirically grounded understanding of the frailties, strengths, and in-built paradoxes of contemporary alternative news media projects, and their potential position of power.

Challengers and Field Positions

Inspired by Bourdieu's work, scholars have explored journalism as a social field (see Benson and Neveu 2005; Eldridge 2018, 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023; Vos 2016). Fields are social spaces, structured around heteronomous (economic) and autonomous (unique skills, values, and knowledge in the field) poles (Benson and Neveu 2005; Örnebring et al. 2018). Members of the field share and accept the *doxa*, in other words the basic purpose, values and practices that are often implicitly understood to be the core of journalism. Doxa maintains social order and ensures stability. An important point is that actors, including journalist and news organization, encompass different symbolic and material resources, which impact their status and position of power. Even when stable, fields and field positions

are conflictual and actors will always compete for status and engage in boundary-work about who are "worthy" or "unworthy" actors, or who are "insiders" and "outsiders" of the field (Carlson 2017; Eldridge 2018; Maares and Hanusch 2023; Reese 2021).

This paper builds on these insights, and approach journalism as a *strategic action field* (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024a), defined as "a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purpose of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 3). While sharing Bourdieu's conception of a field, a strategic action field approach suggests a conceptual framework for capturing the role of different social actors and how they maneuver to gain support through communicative action and collective framing (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 16). According to the theory, there are three overarching types of social actors – governance units, incumbents, and challengers – that inhibits different positions of power and resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). Incumbent actors are prominent players in the field, such as established news organizations in journalism. They are powerful insiders because institutional rules and collective frames work in their favor and used to support their privileged position (Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024a). Incumbents are often closely connected to governance units that are internal back-players in a field. They play an important role in the reproduction and stabilization of the field by reaffirming and defending that status quo (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 13–15). In journalism, professional organizations, industry associations, unions, press ombudsmen, press councils and journalism institutes can serve as examples. Such actors function as important gatekeepers concerning who has authority, status and legitimacy in the field, and play an important part when it comes to determining insider-outsider positions (Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024a).

Within the strategic action field theory *challengers* represent the underdogs in the field, positioned at the periphery with limited resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). They may reluctantly conform to some of the logics of the field but also try to resist or challenge the existing hierarchies and gain influence. Alternative media represent a complex type of challenger to journalism, as it refers to a broad category of actors that have in common that they want to be and do something different than incumbent media organizations, but that at the same time they vary greatly in terms of their missions, styles, and practices (Eldridge 2025; Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024b; Staender, Humprecht, and Esser 2024). When a growing number of actors are producing news (or news-like content), it may lead to a more diverse journalistic field, but it also becomes increasingly difficult to separate between legitimate or illegitimate actors (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Cushion 2021; Eldridge 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023; Schapals 2022). Importantly, as Eldridge (2025) points out, it is necessary to distinguish between agonistic journalistic actors that may be critical but that commit to journalistic ideals, and antagonistic journalistic actors that engage in deceptive practices, a point we support and have elaborated on elsewhere (see Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024b). At the same time, alternative media is a moving target: they often communicate and act in paradoxical ways shifting from inside and outside positions, and they can suddenly change their course of action.

To what degree alternative media as challengers manage to create support and coalitions for their projects depends on their "social skills". Inspired by symbolic

interactionism, Fligstein (2001) argues that actors will strive to engage in positive representations of themselves. Socially skilled actors will manage to induce cooperation because they succeed in communicating their missions and visions in a way that other actors recognize, support and identify with (113). The practice of self-representation must connect on a cognitive and affective level with others and be authoritatively framed in a way that invites collaboration and collective action (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 45). The ambition and the outcome may be manifold. At one level actors may achieve material gains, but more importantly they may experience a sense of belonging and meaning, which is a powerful, basic human need. Incumbents, particularly in stable fields, that already have managed to create strong shared collective frames amongst actors and that benefit from solid coalitions, may use their social skills to reaffirm solidarity and shared identities in the field. For challengers, however, they are dependent on understanding possible opportunities and limitations in the field. They must identify and exploit vulnerabilities in their opponents' alliances but also strive to build collaborations inside and outside the field on lesser, and maybe more original and radical, terms than incumbents and governance units (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 48). For alternative media, a common strategy has been to combine their reporting on specific topics with media criticism directed at incumbents and governance units (Brems 2022; Cushion 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). It is necessary, we argue, to further disentangle the social skills of alternative media and to critically analyze their framing of their projects and practices, as this can inform us about their room to maneuver and create alliances.

Method and Data

The study builds on in-depth interviews with alternative media editors and senior editorial staff in alternative media projects in Norway. The Norwegian media system belongs to the Nordic cluster (Brüggermann et al. 2014; Syvertsen et al. 2014). International media system typologies find that Norway has comparatively strong established news organizations despite digital transformations, influential institutional back-players (e.g., professional organizations), expansive media policies, robust legal frameworks and extensive media freedom and autonomy (Ihlebæk, Figenschou, and Olsen 2024). The last decade, alternative media initiatives have gained some influence in the Nordic region and particularly on social media (Mayerhöffer, Kristensen, and Ramsland 2024). Trust in alternative media is in general much lower than for established news media and distrust in the established news media is higher amongst those that use alternative media (Brems 2024).

The study is based on in-depth interviews with individual editors and senior contributors to alternative media, to gain insights into their self-perceptions and framing of their alternative projects. To get an overview of potential participants we used expert reports, news media coverage, as well as online searches. We followed a purposive sampling strategy (Tjora 2021) selecting outlets according to the following principles: they share an aim to be a corrective to the established Norwegian media, they are digital native sites; and they have published "news or views" in Norwegian on a weekly to daily basis. At the time of designing the study, in 2019/20, we identified 15 alternative media sites and after numerous requests, we conducted 13 qualitative interviews with editors and editorial staff, representing 11 of the 15 alternative sites. Two of the editors were interviewed

twice (in total 15 interviews). We have interviewed the editors in (listed in alphabetical order) *Alternativ-media.com, Derimot.no, Document.no, Ektenyheter.no, Gjenstridig.no, Hemali.no, INyheter.no, radikalportal.no, Resett.no* (here we also interviewed senior contributors), *Steigan.no,* and a senior representative for *FMI*.[1] (see Table 1 for an overview). Four outlets did not respond to our numerous requests (*Lykten.no, Frihetskamp.no, Rights.no, Herland Report).*

The alternative media sites (here listed in alphabetical order) included in the study represent a variety of alternative media as summarized in Table 1.

They vary in size, organization, and reach, and varying levels of ideological radicalism (radical/extreme-right, far-left, anti-capitalist, anti-vaccination/pharma, immigration-critical). Their approach to the journalistic field furthermore varies. The most deviant sites take an *anti-systemic position* representing small sites that are hostile, demonstrate poor understanding of professional journalism and publish in a more inflammatory and conspiratory style. These actors can in general be placed outside the field of journalism,

Table 1. Overview of alternative media sites.

Alternative sites	Overall aim	Ideological position	Position journalistic field	Staff
Alternativ-media.com (2018)	To expose what the uniform mainstream media is hiding, protect freedom of speech	Anti-system, far-right	Anti-system	Voluntary work, < 5 people, web TV
Derimot.no (2015)	To counter corporate media controlled by US Empire (military-industrial-media complex)	Anti-system, anti-imperialist	Anti-system	Voluntary work, < 5 people
Document.no (2003)	To be a leading rational alternative to the echo-chambers of consensual, irrational media	Conservative, immigration critical	Pragmatic insider	Paid (and voluntary) work, > 20 people
Ektenyheter.no (2010)	To provide "real, true news" to counter mainstream media propaganda and bias	Conservative, far-right	Independent	Voluntary work, < 5 people
FMI.no (n/a)	To defend the Norwegian nation's culture and people and counter state propaganda /System media	Anti-system, far-right	Anti-system	n/a
Gjenstridig.no (2018)	To provide critical coverage of Islam, immigration, culture wars, protect freedom of speech	Immigration critical	Independent	Paid and voluntary work, < 5 people
Hemali.no (2019)	To convey independent coverage of research, experiences and knowledge about health, nutrition and lifestyle	Esoteric / holistic health	Independent	Paid and voluntary work, < 5 people
INyheter.no (2022)	To challenge irresponsible, consensual establishment media and authorities	Critical, far-right	Independent	Paid and voluntary work, > 10 people
Radikalportal.no (2013)	To provide critical, independent information and debate to provide a just and climate-friendly society	Progressive left	Independent	Voluntary (and paid) work, < 5 people
Resett.no (2017-2022)	To counter consensual mainstream media, give voice to oppositional actors and frames	Immigration critical, far-right	Independent	Paid and voluntary work, > 10 people
Steigan.no (2014)	To provide anti-capitalist, critical, serious and verified journalism and an arena for public debate	Anti-system, anti-capitalist, far-left	Independent	Voluntary work, > 10 people

as they do not acknowledge or at any level adhere to the rules of the institution and forefront antagonistic and xenophobic positions. Most alternative sites in our study are at the periphery of the field, taking an *independent position* expressing agonism towards journalistic practices, publishing partisan, ideologically biased content, while acknowledging the journalistic institutions and professional ethics. One site takes what we have identified as a *pragmatic insider position* by obtaining institutional membership when beneficial, while remaining agonistic towards field insiders and journalistic practices, and, publishing partisan, ideological content (see Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024b, for further elaboration). It is important to stress, however, that the line between the different positions is not static. As alternative media sites are very much dependent on individual engagement and participation, the content and style may differ according to the persons that are engaged in covering certain topics at specific times. Most of the sites studied do not have a thorough editorial line, which can result in inconsistent, messy profiles.

The interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes and were conducted by both authors, face to face or digitally. All interviews were recorded by the *Diktafon* app[2] and transcribed by two research assistants. Some interviews were conducted in 2019–2020, although most interviews were completed in 2022-2023. The results from the two interviews periods do not differ significantly, although anti-system and thematically oriented sites gained momentum after Covid19 and the Ukraine war as alternative media seek to take advantage of major crisis. The project was reviewed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT) and adheres to ethical guidelines regarding privacy protection, confidentiality, and fair representation. The authors conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews (Tjora 2021). The interview transcripts were coded in NVivo (version 1.7.1). We first read through all interviews and discussed interesting findings. Then we analyzed the interview transcripts by employing broader descriptive codes organized around particular sections of the interview guide (e.g., accounts of organization and business models, aims and motivations, editorial processes, perceptions of the audience and incumbents). Codes were later split or merged according to the theoretically informed codes that emerged from an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), and the analytical codes – the overarching frames and framing of core values was developed in the final rounds of coding. The concrete coding steps were continually discussed and modified in line with analytical insights. All direct quotes used in this study have been approved by the interviewees. Informants are anonymized and identified by title (e.g., Editors 1-11).

Interviewing antagonistic actors such as alternative news media can be both resource-demanding and challenging. Recruiting informants among people who deeply oppose the political and media establishment is time-consuming and the actual interviews can be stressful due to some informants' confrontative style. Most of the interviewees were generous and reflexive, though, providing insights into the editorial projects of alternative actors and answering follow-up questions. Most of the interviewees lack a professional journalistic background, but several are skilled strategic communicators with backgrounds such as independent writers, publishers and/or analysts, meaning that their interviews represent how they want themselves and their projects to be perceived. Close-up enquiries enable insights into motivations and experiences of power and mobilization that could not have been gathered by analyzing alternative news media content or public statements (Hall 2022, 718). In-depth interviews are thus well-suited to analyze framing and self-perceptions of these challengers, whereas analysis of the alternative

media's content, effects and actual performance requires other methods. Taking people seriously and studying their positions in-depth does, however, involve asking critical questions to probe the implications of their opinions through follow-up questions and analysis. Two interviewees had a more aggressive style, though, and these interviews took less form of a dynamic interview conversation, as there was no opening for critical follow-up questions in these cases.

The study has some limitations that need to be accounted for. First of all, the sample is relatively small even though we have included what we have identified as significant actors in the field. Following a purposive sampling strategy, there is furthermore a risk that we have missed some alternative media sites that could have provided different insights. The risk is further elevated when conducting research on a fluctuating phenomenon where actors can change course, and new actors can enter, and others disappear. Finally, the study was conducted over a period including Covid19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While these topics were not raised by us specifically in the interviews, it may have impacted on how the informants framed their projects.

Analysis: Balancing Victimhood and Exceptionalism

Overall, we identify two overarching positions of alternative media editors, framing themselves as *victims* and *exceptional*. These overarching frames mirror the dual self-representations of alternative media actors, as alternative media build authority from being suppressed by established media *and* from representing an alternative – even "superior" – form of journalism operating partly outside the rules of the field (also see Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019, Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020, Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2024) for similar discussions. Broadly understood the victimhood frame comprise how the interviewees portray their alternative projects as being deliberately silenced and demonized by the media and political establishment (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). The exceptionalism frame entails representing themselves as more dedicated, more knowledgeable, more critical and more courageous than other media (Cushion 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). This is often done through exposing the failings of established news media while systematically foregrounding the "victories" of the alternative media (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). These overarching frames work symbiotically to mobilize support for alternative media projects, as seen in the following analysis of alternative media editors' representation of editorial values and practices.

Editorial Values

In the interviews we find four interrelated core values of alternative media, that are deemed particularly important to the self-representation of editors and in different ways evoke the dual victimhood – exceptionalist frames. The four articulations of core values represent reinterpretations of and opposition to existing journalistic norms and values, to provide an alternative vision of what journalism can and should be. The values are often communicated as a form of negation, referring at the same time to what they strive for and achieve, and where incumbents or governance units fail.

The first core value is *independence,* which is also a core value in the broader journalistic field (Carlson 2017; Vos 2016). Established news media defend political and economic independence through professional training and education of journalists, through ethical conduct, regulation, and protection of media freedom (Carlson 2017). From the alternative media editors' perspective, however, incumbents are part of the political-media establishment that must be countered. To position themselves as truly autonomous of this establishment elite, many interviewees stress how they keep social and professional distance from journalistic circles and networks, both as a consequence of being rejected by the elites and because they choose to do so. While this distance reflects the victim position of alternative media and might restrict their projects in many ways, it is also framed as liberating, allowing them to be more aware of and openly critical of establishment elites. This duality is illustrated by the following quote: "It is not like we are invited to parties or win any prizes or anything […] so we have nothing to lose. We don't have any prestige like the established media, so we can say things that they feel that they cannot say" (Editor 10).

Furthermore, independence is framed around economic independence. Because interviewees see major news organizations to be commercially controlled, informants' stay self-governed and self-sufficient by working in small, non-hierarchical initiatives, outside the structures of the commercial mass media and public press support system. Overall, the alternative media projects studied display vulnerable funding models characterized by multiple small, and often unstable, sources of income. For the interviewed editors this is framed as a result of their ideologic opposition to established major sources of income for news organizations (commercial investors, advertisers and state agencies). Due to the sites' anti-establishment position, the opposition to external funders is most vocal in relation to the public funding model and state subsidies characterizing the Norwegian media policy. Beyond the deliberate ideological opposition of the system, it is also apparent, however, that the informants' lack of professional experience in the media industry, hamper their knowledge of potential funding opportunities and ability to secure funding.

Missing stable funding models, the alternative media projects are financed primarily through direct donations from readers and crowdfunding campaigns. Banners asking for donations are prominent on the front pages and/or in the "about us" sections. Stressing the value of organizational independence - editors frame the direct donation model as a positive force, underlining how it pushes them to perform, but also how it depends on visibility, impact and understanding of their audiences:

> We are 100% financed by gifts from our readers. This is typically done through regular small donations, for instance from pensioners or someone who suddenly got a tax refund or something. […] It is a sustainable model per now, and it keeps us on the edge. We are kept on our toes, and in one way you can say that we cannot have a bad day, at least not two bad days in a row. (Editor 11)

> In this regard we are much more independent than most other [media], because our "funders", they have no agenda. (Editor 2)

A second shared core value emphasized by the informants is *boldness*. Being bold and brave is highly valued in journalism in general and part of its authority. It is often referred to in terms of speaking truth to power (e.g., in investigative reporting), uncovering

misconduct (e.g., corruption) and going where the action is (e.g., disasters, conflicts, crime) at high personal risk and cost (Carlson 2017). For the participants in our study, however, boldness is framed around their controversial alternative projects and their willingness to voice unpopular and deviant perspectives that are excluded from the "mainstream". Informants stress how they are victims of political correctness: they have experienced harsh criticism, ridicule, public condemnation, and sanctions from their social and professional networks. Many foreground how daring to push the limits of acceptable ideological positions and opinions, is fundamental to their projects of breaking taboos and uncovering what the authorities seek to censor and suppress. Some stress that being involved in such contrarian projects requires stamina and a tough personality. Editorial boldness is key to the identity and self-perception of informants who perceive their role as rogue, incendiary and confrontational counter-hegemonic voices. The value of boldness is seen as manifested in the alternative media's choice of contrarian sources, controversial topics, provocative style, and "fearless" analysis. Furthermore, informants connect the editorial independence and boldness to uncompromising support for free speech and media freedom, as illustrated in these quotes:

> It's perhaps our main task – to tell what no one else dare to talk about. (Editor 2)

> I'm a huge supporter of bringing things into the light, into the public sphere, even though some people might be hurt or offended by what is being said. It's better to bring it out in the open, than to let it grow in hiding without being confronted by counter-perspectives. (Editor 4)

> I am a free speech fundamentalist because I mean that a society without a wide definition of free speech and democracy, loose its possibility to correct its mistakes. (Editor 11)

A third core value is *authenticity*. Authenticity refers to something that is genuine, ordinary, original or someone that is true to oneself (Enli 2015; Gaden and Dumitrica 2014). In the context of alternative media, authenticity is constructed around the notion of being true to one's beliefs and roots, and hence also the interest of ordinary people. Being honest and transparent about their position is foregrounded as key to secure trust, as described by this editor: "The more we work from our hearts and brains, with something honest, reliable and true, the more we succeed" (Editor 8). The interviewed editors further connect being authentic and real, to being closer to their roots and values of ordinary people, taking a non-elite position. Again, the editors' peripheral position and as challengers in the journalistic field is framed as an advantage that enables them to understand and give voice to ordinary people left behind by journalism. This is primarily expressed by criticizing incumbents for having become distant from the lives and everyday concerns of ordinary people, as seen in these quotes:

> What you can call "the cultural elite", they sleep with each other, they trade jobs with each other, they marry each other, it is a self-recruiting part of society. […] I don't think they know how the population actually live and how they are doing. It's a class issue. (Editor 10)

Finally, *thoroughness* is a core value highlighted by informants, corresponding with the alternative media's aim to be a corrective, inspiring much their continuous and meticulous criticism of political authorities and the media. Informants underline it as a core aim to systematically expose what they perceive as false objectivity and bias by other actors in the field. Editors would explain that they aim for more factual mediated

debates, where arguments (not the people or media outlet voicing them) are evaluated. Combining boldness, independence, and thoroughness the editors thus seek to provide alternative interpretations and visions, as expressed by this statement: "We do not provide alternative facts, because we are actually factual, but we provide alternative interpretations, perspectives and opinions" (Editor 10). Informants underline how they methodically go through and (re)interpret statistics, reports, official documents, and background information, to substantiate their news comments and analysis. They stress how they go deeper, criticize, analyze and do their own research, framing themselves as "thorough analysts" in contrast to ordinary journalists. Thoroughness as a core value is manifested in the editors' self-perception: "I'm not an interviewer, I'm an analyst. I try to spend as many hours as possible – day and night – working. To analyze, we first need to pick reality apart and then to make a synthesis, a complete picture" (Editor 11).

The core values of alternative media resonate with the dominant rules in the field and reflect key journalistic norms. Interviewees, however, use and frame them in a way that promotes their own counter-position and alternativeness through criticizing incumbents and positioning themselves in opposition to the center of the journalistic field. In the following, we will address how these core values are integrated in how they frame their practices.

Production Practices

The framing of core values and limited access to resources can be said to stimulate production tactics such as non-hierarchical organizational structures, collaborative editorial practices, and a more inclusive and participatory forms of news production. Through this, strong bonds are created between those involved. For the smallest alternative media projects in this study, interviewees underline how minimal or non-existent budgets affect their editorial ambition, production practices and impact. In such small-scale projects, much is dependent on extraordinary efforts by individual enthusiasts: The editor/initiator is typically working long hours for the project, unpaid or for a symbolic salary, and together with a few dedicated partners they organize larger groups of unpaid contributors supportive of the sites' project.

To fulfill editorial aims, alternative media seek to invert and diversify the elite-dominated source hierarchies of established news media, however, due to their reputation and antagonism, informants explain that they face structural barriers to gain access to official sources and information. Informants stress that a lack of formalized institutional access (e.g., court cases, Government press conferences, the Parliament) and unwillingness from political, legal and media authorities to respond to their enquiries, have made them stop trying to access official sources. For some this represents an editorial challenge and dilemma:

> Although it is deeply ingrained in my journalistic spine that they should be given the right to reply, my experience has shown that these official statements rarely add to the story and it is a waste of time […] So, sometimes I feel like an "activist" dressed as a "journalist" [when I do not include them] but I really, really care for the cause: To counter a distorted view and give the people information and insights that rarely get out there. (Editor 8)

Informants frame the lack of response and dialogue with established sources, as a result of them being deliberately excluded as unprofessional, deviant actors by the political and media establishment. This statement is illustrative: "There is a reluctance to deal with us. In the mainstream world we ought to be silenced, as it is only the so-called 'independent' editorial media that should control everything!" (Editor 1). The editors accounts of high personal cost for their engagement in alternative media outlined above, make them protective of their sources and contributors identity (e.g., by allowing anonymized sources and contributors), because "those that are interviewed [by alternative media] will not be arrested for what they say, but where they say it" (Editor 10).

Whereas official sources are deemed largely unavailable due to deliberate marginalization, the editors stress how their outsider position enables them to give voice to contrarian sources (rogue experts, concerned citizens, activists) with limited access to established media and mainstream public debate. Inviting in such deviant voices as sources, writers, and contributors, is seen as key to meeting editorial values of independence, boldness, and authenticity. As explained by this informant:

> There are quite a few people out there who do not feel heard and who are not given access into other media. So that, we are quite broadminded and inclusive when it comes to accepting submissions, even though we do not always agree with all perspectives and arguments. We believe that people should be able to express themselves. (Editor 2)

Another key characteristic of the informants' production practices is that they primarily rely on written sources – first and foremost established news media, official reports and statistics. In their argumentation for relying on written sources, the informants underline how these sources are open, digitally accessible and inviting critical analysis. National and foreign news media comprise the point of departure for large amounts of content produced by the alternative news outlets, as all interviewees systematically monitor their mainstream competitors. This is motivated by their self-perception as correctives and critics of the media establishment, as summarized by one editor: "We plough through the news to find their mistakes, right!" (Editor 10). Identifying errors, picking apart stories, addressing bias and criticizing dominant media narratives is seen as a resource-efficient and vital strategy for the interviewees to gain audience interest and trust. Further, international news media, alternative media and social media opinion leaders within their sphere-of-interests are key sources to monitor particular news beats (e.g., immigration, climate, energy, health). Some have content sharing agreements and partnerships with alternative outlets and writers, whereas others serve as curators and (re)broadcast online provocateurs and opinion-leaders. This sourcing strategy is seen as cost-effective and in line with core values: "If we manage to select the best from this segment, collect and publish it, it will be a viable and realistic strategy – given our limited resources" (Editor 6).

Moreover, reinterpretations of public information sources are highlighted by the editors, reflecting their self-perception as thorough, bold analysts, who are "doing their own research". Informants refer to official reports and policy documents from the government, such as public agencies, public committees and international organizations; statistics from the national statistical agency; reports from multinational companies, NGOs, foreign authorities and agencies as informative sources. These official reports from establishment actors and authorities are read with a critical lens to monitor "the enemy" or "the

other side", and hence the selection of reports reflects the ideological position and editorial agenda of the outlets. As illustrated by this editor:

> We use a lot of statistics from public and private actors, like the world bank, IMF, Statistics Norway, EU institutions etc. And we try to match it with statistics that give another view. So, we use a lot of US think tanks, not because we agree with them, but to understand them – to "know your enemy". (Editor 11)

By analyzing and re-interpretating written, official digital sources, the informants argue that they expose what is hidden by media, political and economic powers. Whereas some see the established media as part of the elite cover-up or controlled by political and economic powers, others see incumbents as lazy, superficial and unqualified. This framing of themselves as thorough, courageous news analysts, thus reflect their self-perception as comprehensive researchers and bold thinkers, but also their fragile connection to professional journalism, elite sources and structural limitations.

Distribution Practices

The participants in this study emphasize the crucial role social media platforms have had for their power and impact, but also how the platform dependency is fraught with uncertainty due to their controversial political positions and increased pressure for platform regulation and no-platforming of actors. Overall, there is a shared self-perception among editors that alternative news media are "viral winners", mobilizing social media groups and networks, and thus gaining comparatively more visibility than their size and resources entail.[3] Informants frame themselves as early adapters to social media and digital distribution networks (particularly Facebook). The largest sites have implemented publication plans, internal routines, and metrics to boost reach and engagement, whereas the smaller sites first and foremost use Facebook to link to and promote individual articles. Social media has been a highly efficient, relatively cheap platform to share content, and to secure increased visibility by sponsoring articles. For alternative media, distributing their content on social media is not only framed as imperative to reach their audience, but also to increase their readership, by emphasizing their greater understanding of algorithms and social media logics compared to competitors in established media.

At the same time, interviewees foreground increasingly strained relations with social media platforms, mirroring the concerns of the media industry in general (Ihlebæk and Sundet 2023; Nielsen and Ganter 2022). Because alternative media have used social media platforms actively from the start and built their distribution largely on and adapted to platform infrastructures, they are highly vulnerable for changing platform strategies, as illustrated by this quote: "We are very dependent on Facebook, unfortunately, so when they change their algorithms, we don't really know what they do, but it has become more difficult for us" (Editor 7). Several editors report that they are increasingly sanctioned by platform companies and that these efforts have become more common in the last couple of years. They report being flagged more frequently and have received generic formalized warnings "of not following Facebook standards". The clinical tone and inaccessibility of platform companies, provoke interviewees and is deemed patronizing: "It is Facebook saying: 'My child, we will have to close your site if you do not behave'!" (Editor 8). Several of the outlets report they have been muted,

restricted, banned, or "shadow-banned" (hiding or restricting content without an official warning or information). These quotes exemplify the shared frustration with what is perceived as a more expansive platform censorship:

> They are choking us […] One thing is how they would not let us publish our articles and refused people to share stories from us, and now lately, they have also threatened to kick us out. […] So, it has been a successive curtailment […] It is a remarkable efficient way to control the media, to take away their distribution networks. It is as if the mail service should deny distribution of certain books – it is that level of control. (Editor 11)

> We disappeared, we received a warning, and then we were put in so-called "prison". Our engagement and number of hits dropped, and we've realized that we need to break free from the hostage taker. (Editor 8).

Overall, interviewees frame the platform restrictions and sanctions as politically motivated encroachment on their distribution model and deliberate restriction of their freedom of speech, rather than legitimate and responsible moderation by the platform companies. Hence platforms are framed as suppressors of free speech, in the same way as established media and political authorities are seen as restraining alternative media. Again, how the interviewees understand platform moderation practices and control corresponds with their ideological position and degree of anti-systemness: Ranging from a skepticism towards the political and economic interests of platforms to convictions that the big platform companies are controlled by political authorities. Still, moving their distribution to other "alternative" social media platforms is deemed risky as it could reduce reach and visibility.

Engagement Practices

Alternative media's success as challengers is likewise dependent on their ability to engage the audience and create a relationship with them (Frischlich et al. 2023), convincing them that alternative media are bold, authentic, thorough, and independent. Throughout the interviews the editors portray themselves as more closely linked with and identifying with their audience than other media. This is done by stressing how they themselves are positioned outside of elite circles, together with their users, taking a bottom-up approach. Editors contrast their editorial mission to the failures of established news media which are deemed distant, elitist, and corrupted by power, as seen in these statements:

> A good story for us is about rich people […] Amongst our readers, we have many unskilled workers and people that do not have higher education, and some that are unemployed or on social benefits. They have more frustration than others about such issues and the lack of journalism about it, so that's a good story for us. (Editor 7)

> We talk to those who agree with us and those we can call ordinary, common people. People with a house, a dog, a mortgage on the house, mobile phones and kids. (Editor 10)

As such there is a clear reference to questions of class and power, as well as populist rhetoric, when alternative media talk about themselves and their engagement practices. Informants argue that by aligning with and raising issues deemed important for ordinary people, they can engage groups largely ignored by established news media.

Another set of core strategies to engage the audiences of alternative media, comprise inviting the users into the production of alternative media through user participation and interactivity. As outlined above, the alternative media sites have horizontal production lines that invite submissions from amateurs and often include non-professional writers as part of their regular contributors. Further, interactive digital platforms enable them to experiment with longer, participatory interactive formats such as live streaming of conversations, studio debates or interviews. Editors underline that these formats enable transparency, interactivity and in-depth coverage of issues deemed important to them and their users. These experimental participatory formats, they argue, enable them to integrate users directly into their production at a relatively low cost and technical insights. Another way of giving voice to ordinary people has been through facilitating comment sections, to invite readers to react to ongoing stories without strict moderation. Addressing the fact that many of these comment sections have been characterized by harassment and vilification of perceived opponents (see also Haanshuus 2022), interviewees downplay their editorial responsibility by framing comment sections as an arena for free speech and popular opinions. Many are critical of the established news media which have closed their comment sections in recent years, what interviewees see as treating the audience like second class citizens: "The other media have closed the comment sections. This to me is like telling people: You are garbage! We don't want to spend time with you!" (Editor 3).

It is first and foremost through social media that alternative news media underline their engagement skills, by allowing views, communicative styles and actors that push the limits of acceptable utterances. The editors argue that they have mobilized emotional responses driving up commenting, sharing, and reactions among readers. Further, many of the interviewed editors are themselves networked opinion-leaders with high activity and number of followers on their personal accounts. They position themselves as vocal debaters, enjoying the style, the quick wit and excitement of heated debates, attracting both opponents and allies. Some see social media as the primary arena to promote their cause, recruit followers and thus potential readers. Here, being criticized by opponents and contested in social media, is framed as an opportunity for visibility, rather than a burden:

> Luckily, there are always ongoing debates about us, and always someone defending us – so we do not [always] have to be out there ourselves. (Editor 11)

> We follow up in the comment sections and love a good debate. We have haters in our comment sections that are more than welcome, as long as people are not defamatory. (Editor 8)

Several informants started up as political bloggers or individual writers, and they find that Facebook affordances have enabled them to develop personal ties and direct communication with a small, but loyal and dedicated community of readers. Looking back, one longtime editor underlines the value of these online networks:

> Readers know me by my first name, many have followed us from we were a tiny site until today […] These readers – who are not my friends, but longtime followers – have developed a personal relation to me and supported me and my family in difficult times. So, in that way it is a "community", but it is not a club or organized group. (Editor 10)

Discussion

The present paper enables insights into how alternative media challenge journalism from a strategic action field approach, based on how editors frame their editorial values and practices (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024a). As challengers, alternative media are positioned on the margins of the professional field and thus represent a social actor with poorer resources than incumbents and governance units. Challengers are not bound by field rules and routines in the same way as incumbents, and their position entails thinking outside established field practices, rules and values (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). The challengers' ability to mobilize support depends on how their paradoxical position on the periphery of the field is communicated.

The first finding is that alternative media editors use the victimhood frame and the exceptionalism frame interchangeably, when presenting their editorial values and production practices. Editors repeatedly underline their marginal position in the field (how they struggle due to political sanctions, unstable resources, weak alliances with other actors, and platform dependency), but also foreground how their editorial projects are counter-hegemonic, representing a novel type of journalism (independent, bold, thorough and authentic). By evoking the victim frame editors seek to reaffirm solidarity and build a shared identify with other actors that have experienced such criticism; portraying themselves as courageous counter-voices fighting for freedom of speech and giving voice to contrarian perspectives (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Such political use of the victimhood frame has strong mobilizing potential as it is built on shared "claims to suffering" that accrue moral status to the claimant and attach responsibility to other social actors to gain recognition, sympathy, and symbolic authority (Chouliaraki 2024). In the case of the informants, the victimhood frame is grounded in personal experiences and used strategically (Chouliaraki 2024), claiming the morality and status of victimhood by inverting the criticism of alternative media as hostile, lawless "hate sites" to gain other actors' recognition and support (Fligstein 2001, 113). This resonates with certain segments of their users and contrarian individuals who represent opinions deemed deviant by the established media. For alternative media the victim frame has a potential to connect on an affective level to build identification and support with other groups critical of journalism, who themselves experience cultural displacement, resentment of and unfair treatment by the established media (also see Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). Throughout the interviews this is expressed through negative framing of other social actors – the established news media, political authorities and platform companies – as suppressive, corrupt and power-hungry (a mobilization strategy labeled "vilification", by Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020; also see Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024b). How the vilification strategy is communicated varies between the sites, though, with the smallest antagonist anti-system sites engaging in inflammatory, hostile attacks on societal elites and out-groups. One illustrative example here is how editors frame platform moderation and sanctioning of unwanted content as "political censorship" and patronizing misuse of power, inverting the criticism of themselves as rogue actors spurring harassment, hate and misinformation on social media platforms (see Staender, Humprecht, and Esser 2024, for elaboration).

A second finding is that when interviewed about their editorial projects, the alternative media editors do not engage in self-criticism or profound critical evaluation of their

strategies and values. The informants either outsource the responsibility for their precarious field position to other social actors (as outlined above) or reframe their weaknesses as comparative strengths. When the exceptionalism frame is employed by informants, it often represents an inversion of professional insights by the established media, claiming that the alternative media is exempt and above conventional professional routines. One example is how the lack of access to establishment sources, lack of trained staff, low production skills and poor facilities, is downplayed, and reframed as practices reflecting the editorial values of thoroughness and authenticity. Another illustrative example is how editors reframe the lack of financial and organizational sustainability (characterizing particularly the smallest, most antagonistic alternative sites studied), as indicators of editorial independence and boldness. To what extent such reframing of their field position and resources is used strategically to mobilize support from their users and other actors critical of journalism, and to what extent it is a result of poor understanding of the rules and routines in the professional journalistic field, is difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that it demonstrates a lack of resources and knowledge, needed to challenge the professional hierarchies in the field and alter journalism (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

Conclusion

At the time of this study, the Norwegian journalistic field represent a stable field, where incumbents and governance units are comparatively strong and united (also see Pedersen et al. 2024). As challengers in a strategic action field, the alternative media sites studied are comparatively weak due to unstable financial and organizational resources, low social skills, as well as high dependency on both global tech platforms and alternative media users for distribution, engagement and financial stability.[4] Promoting collective frames of victimhood and exceptionalism may resonate with their small, but loyal and engaged users and thus they have a mobilizing potential, yet, they have neither been able to build efficient and lasting enough alliances with other social actors to substantially alter journalism or existing position of power in the field in Norway, nor to dramatically disrupt audience patterns and trust in the news media (Ihlebæk, Figenschou, and Olsen 2024). The collective frames are largely shared between the alternative media studied, but we find little evidence of organized cooperation between the sites in the Norwegian context (see Ihlebæk and Figenschou 2024b, for elaboration). The Norwegian case thus stands in stark contrast to the disruptions caused by far-right alternative media and populist anti-media political actors in other journalistic fields, where the professional core of governance units and incumbents are weaker and the alliances between working to undermine professional journalism have become more powerful (Reese 2021).

Notes

1. This site is closely connected to The Popular movement against migration (FMI), whereas the others are formally independent of social movements.
2. The Diktafon-app is developed by the University of Oslo and allows researchers to safely record audio on smartphones, as it is stored encrypted on the device. The data is sent to a secure online service at the University of Oslo. For more information visit Nettskjema-diktafon - University of Oslo (uio.no).

3. This is particularly true for alternative news media that can be placed on the far-right (see Dahlback 2021).
4. The alternative site Document.no is the exception here (also see Table 1) as it gained public press support in from 2023 and expanded its staff,budgets and audience after the empirical interviews for this study was finalized.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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