

Divisions of labor: Why alternative news users seek out mainstream news media in Denmark and how they combine mainstream and alternative content

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Abstract

Alternative media users have low trust in mainstream media but use them, nonetheless. Departing from this paradox, this study explores why the users seek out mainstream media and how they combine alternative and mainstream content. Qualitative interviews with 25 users of Danish alternative media show that they especially use mainstream news for general orientation but also to fulfil social, opinion, and entertainment needs, as part of everyday habits, and because of unwanted incidental exposure. Furthermore, the study identifies two distinct ways of combining alternative and mainstream media. (1) A clear division of labor where mainstream media provide orientation on current affairs and parts of the picture on topics the users consider biased in mainstream news; and alternative media give counterbalance by providing the missing pieces. (2) An unclear division of labor where alternative and mainstream media play overlapping roles, rendering alternative media less important to the users. The findings suggest that the use of alternative media only makes sense in combination with mainstream news and give little indication that they could entirely displace mainstream media. However, this must be understood in relation to the specific Danish media context and the study concludes by discussing the findings' relevance in other media contexts. The findings are based on a small sample and cannot be generalized to all Danish users of alternative media.

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Keywords

Alternative media, Denmark, mainstream media, motivations for news use, news repertoires, news users, qualitative interviews

Introduction

Alternative news sites position themselves as correctives of the dominant mainstream news media (Holt et al., 2019) whose alleged biases they claim to counter (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). Accordingly, prior studies show that their users have low(er) trust in mainstream news (e.g. Andersen et al., 2021; Schulze 2020) and suggest that they turn to alternative media in response to perceptions that mainstream media are politically biased, favor the economic and political elite, or even tell outright lies (e.g. Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger 2023). Previously, low(er) trust in mainstream media was assumed to make people turn away from them (Tsfati and Capella 2003). However, recent studies have established that alternative media users do not inhabit so-called echo chambers but use a mix of alternative and mainstream news (e.g. Andersen et al., 2021; Brems 2024; Müller and Schulz 2021).

This apparent paradox begs the question why alternative news users seek out mainstream media if they consider them biased (Brems 2024) and what they gain from using them if they do not trust them (Andersen et al., 2021). A central concern is that exposure to mainstream news makes no difference if the users disregard it as ‘fake news’ and end up basing their opinion formation and political actions solely on one-sided information from alternative media (Strömbäck 2023). Such questions and concerns reflect growing acknowledgement that assessing the implications of citizens turning to alternative news sources requires switching focus from *what* news people are exposed to, to *why and how* they engage with those sources of news (ibid; Bruns 2019). A burgeoning body of work has already provided valuable insights into different motivations for and ways of using alternative media (e.g. Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger 2023; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). The present study adds novel insights to this literature by exploring *why alternative news users use mainstream media* (RQ1) and *how they combine alternative and mainstream content* (RQ2).

The study is based on qualitative interviews with 25 users of Danish alternative media. Drawing on the news (or media) repertoires approach (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012), it explores how the users’ engagement with mainstream media can be understood as the result of intentional use to fulfil different needs but also of everyday habits and unwanted incidental exposure. Furthermore, it identifies two distinct roles alternative media and mainstream media can play relative to each other in the users’ news repertoires: Some account for a clear division of labor where mainstream media take care of broad coverage of current affairs and provide parts of the picture on news topics the users consider biased, and alternative media act as counterbalance by providing the missing pieces. Others account for a less clear division of labor where mainstream and alternative media play overlapping roles, leaving the latter as a peripheral supplement. These findings indicate little risk that alternative media might displace their mainstream counterparts. However,

due to the relatively small sample and limitations to the recruitment procedure (see below), the findings should not be read as representative of all Danish users. Furthermore, the findings must be understood in relation to the specific Danish case. The article concludes by discussing their relevance in dissimilar media contexts.

Defining alternative media: From champions to challengers of democracy

Alternative media is a much-debated term. Traditionally, it was associated with participatory grassroots initiatives like ethnic minority media, women rights magazines, and activist movements' media (Coleman and Ross 2010; Rauch 2007) that sought to challenge mainstream (mass) media hegemony and give voice to marginalized groups (Atton 2015). Within the last decade, however, the term has increasingly been used to denote online news sites that leverage a self-proclaimed outsider-position at the political margins of society to question the legitimacy of mainstream media based on assertions of ideological biases, political correctness, and elitism (e.g. Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). The present study aligns with this conception of the term. While they are a heterogenous group (Heft et al., 2020), the content of both left-wing and right-wing alternative media is often characterized by populist rhetoric, attacks on mainstream media, and (extreme) partisanship (e.g. Brems 2023b; Freudenthaler and Wessler 2021; Mayerhöffer 2021). In this context, mainstream media have come to be seen less as a hegemonic behemoth in need of challenge and more as a stronghold against biased or misleading information; and alternative media and the use of them recast as a threat, rather than an asset, to democracy (Holt 2020).

Studying alternative media use as news use

To explore why alternative media users seek out mainstream media and how they combine these different types of content, the study draws on the notion of news repertoires, referring to the cross-media constellation of news sources or “news-like items” (Vulpius et al., 2023: 80) people regularly engage with. This perspective offers a holistic (Swart et al., 2017) and relational (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012) approach to news use, which means that news repertoires must be considered in their entirety and the use of any specific news source understood through its relation to other news sources in the news repertoire (ibid.). This makes the news repertoire perspective well-suited for investigating how the users combine alternative and mainstream media.

Similar to uses and gratifications theory, which posits that users rationally choose news media to fulfill certain needs (e.g. Ruggiero 2000), the news repertoires perspective assumes that people combine different sources of news to “structure their everyday life and fulfill their needs for information, entertainment, opinion formation, sociability, and engagement” (Swart et al., 2017: 1345). Furthermore, users may engage with certain news sources because they enable them to participate in social networks and uphold their public connection to political life (Couldry et al., 2007; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022; Schröder and Larsen 2010). From this perspective, it can be assumed that alternative media users seek

out these and mainstream media because they fulfil specific needs; otherwise, they would hold no place in their news repertoires.

The news repertoires perspective thus emphasizes how people actively shape their own news diets by selecting among the available options, a role that has become increasingly important with the transition to a high-choice news environment (Strömbäck et al., 2018). However, it also stresses that news use is shaped by habits and everyday routines (e.g. Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022). Furthermore, recent years' research into digital news use highlights that information flows are not only shaped by intentional choices but also by social and algorithmic curation (Thorson and Wells 2016). People may incidentally stumble across news when they are online for other reasons (Schäfer 2023), for example in their social media feeds, whether because it has been shared by their connections or prioritized by the platform algorithm. From these perspectives, the use of alternative and mainstream media should not necessarily be understood as a rational choice motivated by certain needs but may also be incidental or interwoven with everyday habits.

Explanations of alternative media use

It is only recently that academic scholarship has taken up investigation of the users of alternative media (Schwarzenegger 2023). Part of this literature has focused on exploring motivations for and ways of engaging with alternative media and showed that they can be very diverse. On the most critical end of the spectrum, some seek out alternative media in response to perceptions that their political views are not reflected in mainstream media, which serve as tools of the economic and political elites (Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger 2023). Such users claim to have turned their back on mainstream media or follow them to monitor alleged lies (ibid). More moderately, others use alternative media for different angles on topics they consider biased (Noppari et al., 2019), to challenge and fill gaps in mainstream news coverage (Schwarzenegger 2023; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022), and as a complementary perspective (Schwarzenegger 2023). One study found that such users explained their use of mainstream news with difficulty finding alternative sources (Noppari et al., 2019). Additionally, alternative news use can be motivated by curiosity, interest in political thinking, and entertainment (Noppari et al., 2019), a sense of belonging to a community (dis)believing the same things, or monitoring the other political side by following alternative media with opposite stances (Schwarzenegger 2023).

Other studies have shed light on how alternative media spread on social media. Studies from the U.S., Norway, and Sweden show that content from alternative media is amplified on social media, which may help them reach an audience beyond their core users (Hiaeshutter-Rice and Weeks 2021; Larsson 2019; Sandberg and Ihlebæk 2019). Supporting this, social media use is associated with alternative news use across countries (Müller and Schulz 2021; Schulze 2020). Another study explored how Norwegian immigration-critics actively curate right-wing information flows on social media, among other things by following right-wing alternative media and connecting with likeminded peers (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2023). Existing studies thus suggest that alternative

media use can be understood as the result of active choices rooted in different motivations but also as shaped by social networks and algorithmic curation.

Finally, while some users claim to have abandoned mainstream media entirely, as noted above, survey studies have established that the users generally do not rely solely on alternative media but also use mainstream media (e.g., [Andersen et al., 2021](#); [Brems 2024](#); [Müller and Schulz 2021](#)). Although the findings from the interview-studies reviewed above do give some indications of how the users engage with mainstream media, we still have only limited knowledge of why users seek out mainstream media if they consider them biased and how they combine alternative and mainstream content. A U.S. study found that activist users of alternative media downplayed their use of mainstream news, but some explained reading them with an ironic distance or to keep track of headlines ([Rauch 2007](#)). Work focusing on populist citizens and news skeptics have proposed need for orientation, habits, desire for counterarguing, or seeking confirmation that mainstream media are biased as possible explanations for their mainstream news use ([Schulz 2019](#); [Tsfati and Capella 2005](#)). However, this remains to be investigated. It is against this backdrop that the present study presents an in-depth exploration of why alternative media users also use mainstream media and what roles alternative and mainstream media play relative to each other in the users' news repertoires.

The Danish context

The Danish media context is characterized by high professionalization ([Hallin and Mancini 2004](#)) and a strong public service tradition that ensures access to neutral news content ([Albæk et al., 2015](#)) and enjoys widespread support from the population ([Newman et al., 2023](#)). Trust in mainstream news is generally high (*ibid.*), although with larger shares of the population identifying as left-wing or right-wing saying news media treat their opinions unfairly ([Schrøder et al., 2021](#)). These traits set Denmark apart from the U.S. media context, characterized by a weak public service tradition ([Steppat et al., 2023](#)) and generally low trust in mainstream news ([Newman et al., 2023](#)). While Danish quality newspapers are not biased in favor of specific parties ([Albæk et al., 2015](#)), their ideological leanings are reflected in especially their opinion content (e.g. [Hjarvard 2010](#)) and mainstream public debate is considered inclusive of controversial opinions, especially immigration-critical viewpoints ([Heft et al., 2020](#)). This sets Denmark apart from neighboring countries Sweden and Germany where immigration-critical viewpoints have traditionally been ostracized (*ibid.*).

These characteristics provide less fertile ground for alternative media to thrive and measured by supply, the Danish media ecology is less developed than in the U.S., Germany, and Sweden ([Heft et al., 2020](#)). This is also reflected in findings that Danish alternative media cover a narrower scope of topics than mainstream media ([Brems 2023a](#); [Mayerhöffer 2021](#)) and display a much higher reliance on reuse of mainstream news content than U.S. alternative media ([Mayerhöffer and Heft 2021](#)). While some studies suggest that the demand for alternative news is also smaller in Denmark than in the U.S., Germany, and Sweden ([Heft et al., 2020](#); [Newman et al., 2018](#)), other studies indicate that approximately a fifth or a sixth of the population use alternative media ([Brems 2024](#);

Steppat et al., 2023). The final section of the article discusses what the Danish context means for the interpretation of the findings and their relevance for dissimilar media contexts as those described.

Data and methods

The present study focuses on users of 12 Danish alternative media, selected based on previous studies (Blach-Ørsten and Mayerhöffer 2021; Brems 2023b). Three are left-wing (*Konfront*, *Netavisen Pio*, *Solidarit*) and nine right-wing (*180Grader*, *24NYT*, *Den Korte Avis*, *ditOverblik*, *Document*, *Folkets Avis*, *Indblik*, *Kontrast*, and *NewSpeak*), reflecting greater supply of the latter. All position themselves as correctives of mainstream media but their degree of political extremity and prevalence and severity of mainstream media criticism varies (Brems 2023b).

Alternative media users can be difficult to access (Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022) why three different sampling strategies were combined. Facebook is a key gateway to Danish alternative news sites (Blach-Ørsten and Mayerhöffer 2021). Therefore, the first recruitment step involved manually downloading profile links to all Facebook users who had reacted ('liking'/'loving'/'laughing'/etc.) to posts from a subset of five of the 12 alternative media (two left-wing; three right-wing, representing different degrees of extremity) during the last 3-7 days. 155 of these profiles/users were randomly selected and contacted via direct Facebook message of whom 11 agreed to participate. Second, all 12 alternative media were asked to share (or let the author share) a request for interviewees via their webpages or Facebook-pages, which five of them did. This resulted in 13 participants and allowed recruiting users who did not use Facebook. Third, one participant was recruited via the author's network's network, resulting in a total of 25 interviewees.

Users of all 12 alternative media are represented in the sample, the interviewees came from all five Danish regions, one in three were women, and level of education ranged from lower secondary to MA degree or higher. While diverse in these respects, interviewees aged 50+ were overrepresented. This aligns with Danish alternative media users being older (Brems 2024) but means that the findings presented might better reflect user practices of older alternative media users. Furthermore, the sample is relatively small, and the recruitment procedure was partly based on self-selection and likely attracted more active users who engage with alternative news on social media or visit their webpages directly. This means the findings might not capture user practices of less dedicated users. The findings should be read with these reservations and not be understood as representative of all Danish alternative news users.

The interviews form part of a larger project on alternative news use in Denmark. The findings presented are based on the parts of the interviews that focused on motivations for and ways of using alternative and mainstream media. Each interview began by mapping the interviewees' news repertoires. This facilitated talk about why they used the specific news sources, how often, what they read about, what made them click articles, etc., comparable to think-aloud protocols (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012). Later, the interviewees were asked to place the news sources they used in concentric circles representing

most, less, and least important (Merten 2020). Two examples hereof are displayed in Figure 1. This provided insight into how the users themselves perceive the structure of their news repertoires and the relationships between the news outlets in them.

The mappings revealed that the interviewed users structured their news repertoires in three different ways: Mainstream media most important (placed at least one mainstream and no alternative media among most important news sources, $n = 6$); alternative and mainstream media equally important (placed at least one alternative and one mainstream medium among most important news sources, $n = 13$); and alternative media most important (placed at least one alternative and no mainstream media among most important news sources, $n = 5$).¹ This distinction is used in the analysis of what roles alternative and mainstream media play in the users' news repertoires presented below. However, the latter two groups will be analyzed together because the analysis identified no substantial differences between them. Users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media were found in all groups and the patterns identified should thus be understood as cutting across users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media unless otherwise stated.

All interviews were conducted by the author in 2021 between two COVID-19 lockdowns (19 face-to-face, six via phone/video-call), most lasted 60-90 minutes. They were carried out in accordance with principles of informed consent and GDPR regulations. To respect their anonymity, the interviewees are referred to by a number in the analysis. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the author using a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to thematic coding (Brems and Arregui Olivera 2024). For interview-guide and analytic codes, see Appendix A.

Findings

Extensive and eclectic news repertoires

The news repertoire mappings showed that all interviewees used Danish mainstream media (e.g. public service, quality newspapers, tabloids) with some also naming international mainstream media (e.g. *CNN*, *Fox News*) and Danish niche news outlets (e.g.

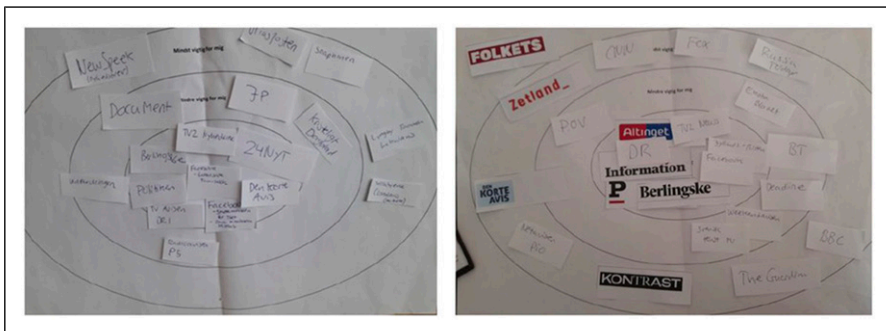


Figure 1. Examples of news repertoire mappings.

Altinget, Zetland). This confirms prior findings that alternative media are not used in isolation but in combination with mainstream news (e.g. [Andersen et al., 2021](#); [Brems 2024](#); [Müller and Schulz 2021](#)) and underscores the relevance of exploring why and how the users engage with them. The interviewees reported using between one and seven Danish alternative media, and many also named a range of other non-mainstream news sources (e.g. political blogs and Covid-19-skeptical Telegram-channels) as well as alternative media from other countries (e.g. Swedish *Fria Tider*, Russian *RT*). Alternative media are thus only some non-mainstream news sources among others in the extensive and eclectic news diets formed by the users.

While alternative media and other non-mainstream sources play similar roles for some interviewees, the analysis below focuses on the roles played by alternative and mainstream media in the users' news repertoires. The analysis first explores why the interviewed users seek out mainstream media. This question is addressed first because the patterns identified cut across groups of users that combine alternative and mainstream media in different ways.

Motivations for using mainstream news media

In line with prior studies, the interviewed users criticize mainstream media for being biased in favor of the left-wing or right-wing, serving the political elite, or being superficial. Importantly, though, it varies how critical they are. Some name specific mainstream media they do not consider biased or single out specific public service news programs or journalists they consider in-depth, critical, or neutral. Similarly, some explain using specific mainstream newspapers because they share their ideological stances or, among right-wing users, because they want to read opinion pieces from specific right-wing bloggers. This use of mainstream media centers on attitude confirmation ([Stroud 2011](#)) and indicates that some users feel their views are, to some extent, represented in mainstream media through bloggers who are given a voice. These granular evaluations of what news content is biased and exemption of some media or content from their general criticism is an important component in understanding why the users seek out mainstream media.

However, it is only a subgroup of the interviewed users who make such exemptions and those who do also use mainstream media they are critical of. The main reason the interviewees give for using mainstream media is that they provide general orientation. Some describe seeking them out for a "fast overview" (IP25) and "very broad coverage of all sorts of things" (IP10) to "follow the general news situation in the world" (IP17). Others highlight that they cover a broad scope of topics ranging from traffic and the royal family to day-to-day politics and foreign affairs. Using mainstream media thus contributes to fulfilling needs for staying informed on societal matters, which for some also serves a social purpose: "Then you can say in the swimming club in the morning, right, when you're sitting in the sauna together, 'well, I just heard that', right. And the others have heard that too [...]" (IP7). Even when they perceive them as biased, mainstream media thus form an important part of the users' feeling of a public connection to political and social life ([Couldry et al., 2007](#); [Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022](#); [Swart et al., 2017](#)).

Using mainstream media for general orientation also has a practical dimension. Similar to Finnish users who explain mainstream news use with difficulty finding alternatives (Noppari et al., 2019), some state that there are no other options if they want news on a broad scope of current affairs. Asked why he uses mainstream media despite considering them biased, one interviewee states that “I have to, because obviously there are no others” (IP20). Another explains “Well, wherever else should I get the news from, right?” (IP14). Their use of mainstream media should not only be understood as bound by necessity, though. Some also mention concerns over becoming one-sided as a motivation for using mainstream news. For instance, IP3 explains mixing alternative and mainstream media “in order not to sit in an echo chamber.” This has the notable implications that while the users consider mainstream media biased and cannot make do with them, they acknowledge that alternative media are one-sided and are not interested in only seeing things from their perspective either.

Relatedly, many interviewees describe an omnivorous interest in news, which they name as a motivation for seeking out both alternative and mainstream media. As examples, some state that “I’m sort of a news nerd” (IP10) and “I could watch news all the time” (IP22). For some users, following news thus constitutes a form of hobby or entertainment and is intertwined with a pronounced interest in politics, which is characteristic of alternative news users (Brems 2024; Schulze 2020).

Diverging somewhat from the patterns outlined above, five of the interviewed users explain seeking out mainstream media to follow the “official narrative” (IP24) in mainstream media or to monitor “what stories they cook now” (IP15), “uncovering their censorship” (IP11), and “counter-arguing” when they publish something wrong (IP13). This is similar to prior findings that the most critical users monitor mainstream media to detect alleged lies (Schwarzenegger 2023). While their use of mainstream media is thus motivated by hostile intentions, their inclination to keep track of what claims are made in mainstream media or what is censored can be considered another form of staying oriented and keeping a public connection.

The reasons for using mainstream media discussed so far predominantly reflect intentional use motivated by fulfilling needs for orientation, social connection, opinion confirmation, and entertainment. However, one user contends that he mainly uses mainstream media because they are unavoidable, suggesting that unwanted incidental exposure can also be part of the explanation. Finally, though not a prevalent pattern, some users explicitly state that their use of mainstream media has a habitual nature. Comparable to activists who downplay their mainstream news use (Rauch 2007), habits are in some cases presented almost as a defense for why they use mainstream media: “I don’t know if I seek them out... I’ll say... I’ll say, it sounds stupid [laughs], that it’s part of the habit of the living room [...]” (IP9). A prior study focusing on news users in general similarly found that people often criticized news media they used, for example for being unreliable or out of accordance with their own political views, but “[i]n practice, it appeared to be very difficult to break with news habits, because these are so closely embedded in news users’ everyday lives” (Swart et al., 2017: 1352). This force of habit might also help explain why mainstream media hold a place in alternative media users’ news repertoires, despite perceptions of bias.

Alternative media as central counterbalance

The analysis now proceeds to investigate what roles alternative media play relative to mainstream media in the users' news repertoires. Beginning with the users who consider alternative media equally or more important than mainstream media, they account for a clear topical division of labor between these two sources of news. Where mainstream media are used for general orientation on a broad scope of topics, alternative media are sought out for their coverage of a narrower scope of topics the users are specifically interested in and consider particularly biased in mainstream news coverage. These topics are not the same for all users but include immigration, climate change, COVID-19, crime, foreign affairs, and minority rights. IP8 explicitly reflects on this topical division of labor:

“*Den Korte Avis* and those they don't have anything on bigger political news, foreign policy, and Danish politics and such, they don't. They don't have to either because they have their niche and say ‘we take care of those areas, and the others [mainstream media] can take care of their areas’, right. But I, as a user, I want it pieced together so that I get a full picture of it all.”

This topical division of labor has the notable implication that mainstream media are seemingly the users' main and unchallenged source of news on the topics alternative media do not cover. Unlike this, alternative media are not the users' sole source of news on the topics they consider particularly biased in mainstream media and seek out alternative media for coverage of. Here, a further division of labor can be identified: In the eyes of the users, mainstream media present a picture of political reality with missing pieces deliberately left out and provide “one side of the story”. In turn, alternative media fill in the missing pieces and provide “the other side of the story”. For example, one interviewee explains that “[o]verall, I think alternative media give the opposite side of truth [...]. Like I say, *DR* and *TV2* they're so scared of telling what ethnicity the criminals have, and it bothers me. And then I go to *Den Korte Avis* and *ditOverblik* and get the rest” (IP12). This shows that alternative and mainstream media are not only combined for coverage of different topics but also for different coverage of the same, contested topics with the purpose of getting a more full or balanced account of what is going on.

The counterbalancing role of filling in missing pieces and providing the other side is directly related to the biases the users see in mainstream news coverage and can take the form of reporting on events and facts allegedly left out of mainstream news coverage, providing left-wing or right-wing angles on current issues, giving voice to other sources, and critically questioning the actions of political powerholders. While alternative media only perform this counterbalancing act on the narrower scope of topics they cover, the users for whom they play this role consider them vital to their news repertoires. For instance, some highlight that specific alternative media are the only news sources that provide the information they do, whereas the information they get from mainstream media could easily be found in other mainstream media: “[...] what they call mainstream, well I can get that information anywhere all the time. The other stuff I can't get to know anywhere, only there [in alternative media]” (IP21). As such, these users feel that one mainstream news source could be replaced by another, but alternative media hold unique places in their news repertoires.

Even so, an important point is that neither mainstream nor alternative media can stand alone for these users. The counterbalancing role of filling in the missing pieces in the puzzle performed by alternative media only makes sense if the rest of the picture has already been provided by mainstream media. Likewise, giving the other side of the story is intrinsically tied to first getting the one side of the story from mainstream media. Just like alternative media are defined by their proclaimed role as correctives of mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019), the users also use their content “more as a reaction to something coming from the mainstream media” (IP18).

Alternative media as peripheral supplement

For the users who consider alternative media less important than mainstream media, alternative media play a more peripheral role as supplement. For them, there is seemingly no clear-cut topical division of labor between alternative and mainstream media. Rather, they use the general orientation from mainstream media for assessing whether and what news needs further exploration, as for example explained by IP10:

“[they] boil down a lot of things, what’s happening in the world, and then they serve you ‘this is what we think is the most important’, and then you can see, is there something in it that you can proceed with and investigate on your own.”

However, when these users critically dig into mainstream news, alternative media do not seem to take center stage. While some of them account for actively seeking out alternative media as part of a daily or weekly routine, others state that they do not always get around to reading the alternative newsletters they subscribe to or explain that they only click articles from alternative media if their friends have shared them or they stumble across an interesting link on social media. Speaking of *Den Korte Avis*, IP14 explains that “[...] it’s not one I look at daily, it isn’t. Well, if I see a post or something, I read it.” While the accounts from the users for whom alternative media play a central role as counterbalance reflect highly intentional use of alternative media, the picture is thus more mixed when looking at the users for whom alternative media play a peripheral role. On the one hand, their exposure to alternative news seems to be incidental (when the newsletters show up in their inboxes, when they stumble across it on social media) and shaped by social connections and platform algorithms. On the other hand, these encounters with alternative news are shaped by prior intentional decisions to sign up for alternative media’s newsletters or ‘follow’ their pages on social media.

The reason why alternative media play a less central role for these users seems to be a partial overlap in the roles played by alternative media and specific mainstream or niche outlets in their news repertoires, which makes alternative media less vital to them. IP5 is a good illustrative example of this. She considers herself right-leaning and explains seeking out the right-wing alternative medium *Kontrast* for analysis and discussion of current affairs from a right-wing angle, which she criticizes especially the public service broadcaster *DR* for lacking: “[...] there is a podcast called *The blue hour* [*Den blå time*], which is kind of like right-wing people sitting and talking about whatever is going on this

week or what topics have been on the agenda or something” (IP5). However, the right-leaning quality newspaper *Berlingske* seems to provide her some of the same as she explains that it “[...] gives a general news overview too from the more right-wing angle [...]”. Likewise, she accounts for using right-wing *ditOverblik* for their coverage of immigration-problems in Sweden but notes that *Berlingske* provides that too. Thus, specific mainstream (or niche) media seemingly provide these users some of the same information as alternative media, rendering the latter less important.

This role overlap between alternative and mainstream media should be understood in relation to the finding that some users mention specific mainstream media they do not find biased, as it is particularly (though not solely) the users who consider mainstream media more important than alternative media who make these exemptions. Thus, the diverging ways in which the users combine alternative and mainstream media are also related to differences in how severe or all-encompassing the users’ dissatisfaction with mainstream media is.

Conclusion and discussion

It is well-established that alternative media users have low(er) trust in mainstream media (e.g. Andersen et al., 2021; Schulze 2020) but recent studies show that they nonetheless use them (e.g. Brems 2024; Müller and Schulz 2021). Departing from this paradox, this study investigated why alternative media users seek out mainstream media (RQ1) and how they combine alternative and mainstream content (RQ2). The findings suggest that the users intentionally seek out mainstream news to fulfil certain needs, especially for general orientation but also opinion confirmation, social connection, and entertainment. Alternative media users’ motivations for mainstream news use are thus not that different from those identified among news users more generally (e.g. Couldry et al., 2007; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022; Swart et al., 2017). However, the findings also show that some may use mainstream news to keep connected to public debate but with hostile motives of countering it. While less prevalent in the data, the users’ engagement with mainstream media must also be understood as the result of everyday habits that are not easily changed (Swart et al., 2017) or unwanted incidental exposure (Schäfer 2023) due to the ubiquity of mainstream news.

Further adding to our understanding, findings showed that some users exempt specific mainstream media and content from criticism and that users mainly consider coverage of specific news topics biased (see also Noppari et al., 2019; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). Thus, another reason why the users rely on mainstream media might be that their low(er) media trust is not all-encompassing. This could be pursued in future studies by investigating alternative media users’ trust in mainstream news at the brand-specific and topic-specific levels (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

In response to RQ2, the study identified two distinct ways of combining alternative and mainstream media, which can be understood as more and less clear divisions of labor between the two types of media. Some users account for a clear division where mainstream media provide news on a broad scope of topics as well as one side of the story and parts of the picture on a narrower scope of topics that the users consider particularly biased

in mainstream news coverage. Alternative media provide the other side of the story and the missing pieces but, notably, never stand alone because their counterbalancing act only makes sense for the users in combination with mainstream media. Other users account for a less clear division where the roles of alternative and mainstream (and niche) media partly overlap. A notable finding is that this seemingly results in alternative media being less important to these users, not in them overtaking the role of mainstream media. In sum, the findings suggest that although the users consider mainstream media biased, they can be relevant sources of information for the users, and indicate limited risk that alternative media could entirely displace mainstream media in the users' news repertoires.

However, these findings must be understood vis-a-vis the specific Danish media context. First, when users of alternative media rely on mainstream news for general orientation, it must be viewed in relation to the strong Danish public service tradition that ensures neutral content (Albæk et al., 2015) and the generally high trust in mainstream news (Newman et al., 2023). Second, the finding that some users seek out mainstream newspapers because they feel their views are represented in the opinion content must be viewed in light of the relative openness to extreme points of view in Danish public debate (Heft et al., 2020). Third, the less-developed Danish alternative media ecology (Heft et al., 2020) arguably sets certain limits for how central a role alternative media can play in the users' news repertoires: Because of the topically narrow coverage offered by alternative media (Brems 2023a; Mayerhöffer 2021), the users must turn to mainstream news if they want information on a broad spectrum of current affairs.

This means that the findings presented may be particular to the Danish case or cases with similar characteristics. In media contexts like those found in neighboring countries Germany and Sweden where public debate has been less tolerant of extreme (immigration-critical) points of view (Heft et al., 2020), it may be less likely that (especially right-wing) alternative media users would find their views represented on mainstream newspapers' opinion pages. In more stark contrast, alternative media users may be less inclined to rely on mainstream news for general orientation in contexts like the U.S. where the public service tradition is weak (Steppat et al., 2023) and trust in mainstream news is low and polarized along partisan lines (Newman et al., 2018). Here, hostile motivations for using mainstream news (either centrist or with the opposite political leaning) may be more dominant. Furthermore, a well-developed alternative media ecology like the one found in the U.S. (Heft et al., 2020) makes it easier to follow a broad scope of news topics while relying only on alternative media. In such situations, other divisions of labor might be found where alternative media to a larger extent overtake mainstream media's informational role.

Speaking against this latter point, however, a recent study suggests that in a polarized media-political context like the U.S., news users more frequently name news sources traditionally considered mainstream as 'alternative sources of information' (Steppat et al., 2023). As such, it is also possible that alternative media would play a less prominent role in users' news repertoires in such contexts because partisan mainstream outlets like *Fox News* and *MSNBC* might fulfil some of the same needs as alternative media do for users in Denmark. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the findings from the present study show that the users express an omnivorous interest in news and explicit desire for exposure to multiple perspectives. If taken at face value, this would indicate that even in a

context where alternative media covered a broader scope of topics, their users would not necessarily abandon exposure to diverse mainstream news altogether in favor of attitude-consistent coverage.

The considerations outlined here point to the limitation of relying on single-country case studies and show the relevance of future comparative studies to explore whether motivations for using and ways of combining alternative and mainstream media differ across media contexts. The present study also has the limitation that it does not allow for exploring whether the roles alternative and mainstream media play in users' news repertoires are stable or subject to change over time. Speaking to the relevance of investigating this, two interviewees who considered alternative media more important than mainstream media accounted for a gradual loss of interest in mainstream news, suggesting that alternative media use might, in some cases, diminish the perceived importance of mainstream news over time. Future studies could investigate this by following the same users for a longer period.

Another limitation is that the study does not provide insight into how the users decide what to believe when engaging with conflicting evidence from alternative and mainstream media. While they claim to consider perspectives from both, it is possible that they consequently align with alternative media. This would effectively result in opinion formation based on the one-sided perspectives of alternative media after all (Strömbäck 2023) and call into question the value of their exposure to mainstream news. This is an important question to investigate in future studies, for example through experimental designs. Finally, it should be reiterated that the study builds on interviews with a relatively small sample and although efforts were made to include perspectives from a diverse range of alternative media users, the sampling strategies employed possibly captured more active users. Therefore, the findings might better reflect user patterns of more engaged users and should not be read as representative of all Danish alternative media users.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes new insights into why alternative news users seek out mainstream media, despite thinking them biased, and different ways of combining alternative and mainstream content. Altogether, the findings suggest that mainstream media, in different ways, constitute a central part of alternative news users' political and social connection that cannot easily be overtaken by alternative media, at least not in the case of Denmark. Furthermore, the study offers the general insight that the interplay between alternative and mainstream media must be understood as shaped both by the specific media context in which they are used and by the users who can actively combine them in different ways, even within the same media context.

Author's note

This is an original manuscript and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration elsewhere.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

The study adheres to ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and legal GDPR requirements. Before the interviews, participants were provided a consent form and informed about the overall purpose of the research project, that the interview would involve questions about their use of news media and political views, that the participants would be pseudonymized, and that they had the right to ask for their data to be deleted. No ethical approval from the institutional review board was applied for, as the research institution with which the author is associated has no general requirement of ethical approval of all projects. The study was registered on the record of research projects working with personal data per requirements of the research institution.

Informed consent

Data was collected in accordance with ideals of informed consent and in alignment with GDPR regulations.

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Data availability statement

Most of the interviewees recounted episodes or gave personal information (e.g. party-membership, names of neighbors, names of relatives, current or previous workplaces, special nicknames they use for specific media) that would make it possible to identify them and did so to an extent where it would be difficult to censor these parts of the interviews. To protect the anonymity of the participants, as promised in the informed consent and in line with the ideal of striving to do no harm, transcripts of the interviews are therefore not included as appendices. Redacted versions of the transcripts can be made available upon request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. For one video interview, this data is not available.

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