

From stark opposition to partial adaption

How 12 Danish alternative media construct and position themselves vis-à-vis the media- and political mainstream

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Abstract

Alternative media are defined by their position as challengers of mainstream media and politics alike. However, recent studies suggest that they act out their opposition to mainstream media and their political partisanship in different ways. Against this backdrop, the study at hand investigates how 12 Danish alternative media construct and position themselves against the media- and political mainstream. The study identifies substantial differences regarding the outlets' commitment to or rejection of the ethical rules and norms of professional journalism, whether they adopt or deviate from a neutral journalistic style, what ideological agendas they advocate, their political ties, and the media- and political criticism they voice. In doing so, the study adds to a growing body of research suggesting that alternative media are a heterogeneous group. Based on these findings, the study discusses the different potentials for impact that alternative media have on the media- and political systems they enter.

KEYWORDS

alternative media, partisanship, Danish media system, degrees of alternativeness, media criticism, political criticism, political parallelism

Introduction and research question

Over the past decade, (hyper)partisan alternative media have entered many Western media systems, including the Nordic (Heft et al., 2020). Unlike other forms of partisan news, these outlets do not only advocate one-sidedly in favor of political agendas, but also explicitly challenge the legitimacy of mainstream media and mainstream politics alike (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). Previous studies have found that they attack the credibility of their mainstream counterparts (e.g., Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), disseminate partisan news content in pursuit of ideological agendas (e.g., Nygaard, 2019), and frequently attack political opponents (e.g., Mayerhöffer & Schwartz, 2020). This has sparked concern that alternative media might erode political- and media trust and fuel political extremism, not least because their upsurge coincides with the rise of populism. When such concerns are voiced, alternative media are usually discussed as a collective group. However, recent studies indicate that they are far from homogeneous. For instance, alternative media employ different strategies of normalization or radicalization (Heft et al., 2020), draw on different frame repertoires in their portrayal of political reality (Klawier et al., 2022), and have varying amounts and targets of media criticism (Cushion et al., 2021) as well as different political orientations and aims (McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021). Thus, while alternative media share some defining traits, there is reason to believe that they do not necessarily act out their opposition to mainstream media and political partisanship in the same way. In other words, they might portray the media- and political mainstream they profess to counter in different ways and take different positions relative to it – and thereby have different potentials for impact on the media- and political systems they enter. Focusing on Denmark as a case, the study at hand further explores this by investigating the following research question:

RQ: How do Danish alternative media construct and position themselves vis-à-vis the media- and political mainstream?

Alternative media and their relation to the media- and political mainstream

The term alternative media has a longstanding research tradition. Originally, it referred to primarily progressive or radical left-wing media advocating minority rights and challenging capitalist hegemony (e.g., Downing, 2001, Atton, 2002). However, it has increasingly been used for denoting – predominantly right-wing – online news outlets disseminating ideologically partisan news content (for

review of this development see Holt, 2020). While it is still debated whether the label should be reserved for outlets possessing the traits originally associated with it (Rae, 2021), this study adopts the definition proposed by Holt et al. (2019), which makes no claims about the ideological aims of the outlets. Rather, it considers the defining trait that they “represent a proclaimed and/or (*self-*) *perceived corrective*, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt et al., 2019, p.862, emphasis in original). Previous studies have investigated this oppositional relation to mainstream media by exploring explicit mainstream media criticism in alternative media content. Six right-wing Norwegian alternative media were found to use criticism of specific news items as basis for more general assertions that mainstream media are ideologically biased in favor of the left, politically correct, neglect reporting on immigration-problems, and are distanced from the people (Fingenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Similarly, a U.K. study found that both left-wing and right-wing alternative media criticized specific mainstream outlets for lacking impartiality, but that left-wing alternative media more often criticized mainstream media in general, while right-wing alternative media more often took aim at individual journalists (Cushion et al., 2021).

Alternative media are not only defined by their oppositional relation to mainstream media but also by their explicit partisanship (Mayerhöffer & Schwartz, 2020) and questioning of the legitimacy of mainstream politics (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019). Several studies have identified promotion of populist and immigration-critical discourses in (right-wing) alternative media (e.g., Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022) and found that they portray European societies as threatened by immigration (e.g., Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019). However, it differs how this partisanship manifests itself and how their agendas are promoted. For instance, right-wing alternative media from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Nygaard, 2019) and Germany (Klawier et al., 2022) seek to advance their ideological agendas by either adopting a neutral journalistic style mimicking that of mainstream media or by being overtly commentary. This kind of heterogeneity is also evidenced by a study comparing 70 right-wing online news sites from the U.S. and five European countries, which found that they employ different strategies of appearing as conventional news sites or openly advertising their right-wing bias (Heft et al., 2020).

Other studies have shed light on whether and how alternative media engage with party-political actors. A Danish study on five right-wing alternative media found that they frequently attacked the credibility of members of political parties from the opposite political side

and, to a lesser extent, supported specific party-political candidates during an election campaign (Mayerhöffer & Schwartz, 2020). Other findings suggest that alternative media can be more or less party-politically or ideologically partisan (Brems, 2022) and can orient more on criticism and support of party-political actors or on taking sides on cultural issues (McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021). Previous studies have also identified ties between some Scandinavian alternative media and political parties and organizations (Brems 2022; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, 2021; Mayerhöffer, 2021).

While the oppositional relation to the media- and political mainstream are general traits shared by alternative media, previous findings thus suggest that alternative media can act out these characteristics in different ways. However, many of the studies reviewed focus solely on right-wing outlets, and most of them focus on the relation to either mainstream media or mainstream politics. This points to the need for more studies that directly compare a broad left-to-right-spectrum of alternative media and investigate their relations to the media- and political mainstream within the same analytical framework, which is the aim of the study at hand.

Analytical framework and the Danish case

Following the definition of alternative media proposed by Holt et al. (2019), the alternative/mainstream schism should be considered a continuum rather than binary categories (see also Kenix, 2011) and any news medium can be more or less alternative. The asserted alternativeness can be analyzed at the micro, meso, and macro level (Holt et al. 2019) and can manifest itself in the structure and content of alternative media (Mayerhöffer 2021). The importance of this latter distinction was evidenced by the finding that five Danish right-wing alternative media resisted “normalization” in the structural dimension, for instance by shunning membership of the press-ethics council and press subsidies, but that equally stark opposition to mainstream media was not mirrored in their content (*ibid.*). In other words, alternative media might appear more oppositional to the mainstream in their structure than their content really is and vice versa. This highlights the importance of studying how alternative media’s positions relative to the media- and political mainstream manifest themselves empirically in both of these dimensions.

Because alternative media are defined by their proclaimed opposition to what is perceived as mainstream in a given system (Holt et al., 2019), what constitutes the mainstream (and how alternative media portray it) must be understood as bounded by the characteristics of the media- and political systems alternative media enter.

Therefore, the study focuses on a single country case (Denmark) and the selection of relevant indicators of alternative media's relation to the media- and political mainstream were guided by the traits of the Danish media- and political context.

Analyzing positions vis-à-vis the media- and political mainstream in the structure

In the structural dimension, the overarching question regarding alternative media's relation to the (media) mainstream is whether they "succumb to an (outward) strategy of normalization or not" (Mayerhöffer 2021, p. 123). In this respect, this study focuses on whether alternative media formally commit to or reject the rules and norms associated with professional journalism (ibid.; Holt et al. 2019), as this is particularly relevant for understanding whether alternative media seek a status (appearing) as legitimate actors within the media mainstream or seek to delegitimize the mainstream. Because the Danish media system has a strong institutionalized self-regulatory system organized via membership of the press-ethics council *Pressenævnet* (Syvertsen et al., 2014), a relevant indicator hereof is *whether alternative media seek or shun membership of the press-ethics council*. Traditional news media are born members, but any born-digital news site can choose to sign up. Therefore, (non-) membership can be seen as an active decision on behalf of alternative media. As an additional indicator, the study considers *what official positions alternative media take on the professional journalistic norm of neutrality*, which alternative media criticize mainstream media for breaching.

As an indicator of their relation to the political mainstream in the structural dimension, the study considers *what official ideological stances alternative media take*. While it is beyond the scope of this article to judge whether the political agendas the investigated alternative media advocate fall within the political mainstream in absolute terms, this can give insights into how broad a spectrum of ideological stances Danish alternative media advocate, where on the ideological spectrum they place themselves relative to each other, and whether they directly address a political mainstream when positioning themselves. The study also investigates *whether alternative media have any ties to political parties or organizations*. The presence or absence of such ties is particularly relevant in the context of the Danish media system, which is historically rooted in the party-press (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

Analyzing positions vis-à-vis the media- and political mainstream in the content

In the content dimension, the main question of interest is to what extent the positions alternative media take in the structural dimension are mirrored in their content (Mayerhöffer 2021). Particularly relevant indicators hereof are any *explicit media- or political criticism*, as this is indicative of whether alternative media seek to delegitimize the mainstream media- and political systems (ibid.). Moreover, this is where different ways of constructing the mainstream that alternative media position themselves as correctives of can be expected to manifest themselves most clearly.

In addition to this, the study considers *what topics alternative media cover and from what angles*. This can give an indication of what different ideological stances Danish alternative media advocate in their content, following the notion that the political stances of alternative media can manifest themselves in their news selection (e.g. McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021). Lastly, the study considers *what journalistic style alternative media employ* in their news coverage as an indicator of the degree to which alternative media adhere to or deviate from the norm of neutrality in their content. The analytical focus points are summed up in Table 1.

	Relation to media mainstream	Relation to political mainstream
Structure	Membership of press-ethics council Official stance on norm of neutrality	Political ties Official political stance
Content	Explicit media criticism Journalistic style	Explicit political criticism Topics, angles (agendas advocated)

Table 1: Analytical framework

Method and data

Selection of cases, documents, and articles for analysis

Cases were selected based on Blach-Ørsten and Mayerhöffer's (2021) overview over Danish "hyperpartisan" alternative media, which includes the seven right-wing outlets *24NYT*, *180Grader*, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, *FOLKETS*, *Indblik*, *NewSpeek*, and the three left-wing outlets *Konfront*, *Netavisen Pio*, and *Solidaritet*. In addition to this, the right-wing outlets *Kontrast* and *ditOverblik* were included in the analysis. These 12 outlets all live up to the criteria of positioning themselves as alternatives to or correctives of

mainstream media, publishing nonfictional content on current affairs, and identifying as news outlets (based on their self-descriptions and page layout) proposed by Heft et al. (2020). The latter criterion excludes blogs (e.g., right-wing *Snaphanen*) and websites of political organizations (e.g., *Nordfront*, *Trykkefrihedsselskabet*) (Mayerhöffer 2021), and the selection of cases should thus include all relevant Danish alternative media spanning from left to right on the ideological spectrum.

Membership of the press-ethics council was assessed based on their list of what online media have registered with the council. Analysis of official stances on the professional journalistic norm of neutrality and official political stances was based on the investigated alternative media's 'about us' sections or mission statements. Analysis of political ties was based on news articles from mainstream media providing information on connections between alternative media and political parties or organizations, direct statements of collaboration in the 'about us' sections and information provided on any economic support from political actors, official records of candidates who have run for political parties, publicly available resumes, and links to the web- or social media pages of political parties on the outlets' front pages (the latter inspired by Frischlich et al., 2020).

To collect the article sample for the analysis of content, all textual content published by each of the selected cases over a two-week period from May 24 to June 6, 2021, was manually accessed (see [appendix A](#)). This was the most recent period at the time of sampling. No elections were coming up, and while Covid-19-restrictions were still enforced, Denmark was well underway in the process of re-opening society, leaving room for other political topics on the news agenda. Because of the focus on adherence to or deviation from the norm of neutrality, only news articles were included in the sample. In cases where the sample of news articles from one outlet exceeded 30 articles, a random sample of 30 articles was selected. *FOLKETS* and *Konfront* published only four and two articles respectively and were therefore excluded from the analysis of content but included in the analysis of structure. The sample from *Kontrast* and *Solidaritet* include seven and eleven news articles respectively and content analysis of these should be read with some reservation. In total, 250 news articles were analyzed.

Qualitative textual analysis

The analysis of the content was carried out as a qualitative textual analysis. Inspired by Deterding & Waters (2021), overall coding categories were derived from the analytical framework outlined above

(see codebook [appendix A](#)). Each article was coded for its dominant topic (see list of topics [appendix B](#)). While this is a qualitative analysis of smaller article samples, the selection of topics combined with qualitative assessments of the angle of the coverage can give an indication of what ideological stances the alternative media promote. All instances of explicit media- and political criticism were identified. The former was defined as any critical mentions of mainstream news media or journalists such as allegations of bias or criticism of specific news items. The latter was defined as critical mentions of political actors, the political system (including the judiciary system, civil servants), or authorities not attributed to any source, thereby taking into account that political coverage often cites political sources criticizing each other. Inspired by previous studies (Frischlich et al., 2020; Nygaard, 2019), all instances where a commentary tone, calls for action, or degradation was used were identified to assess the journalistic style employed. Examples of commentary tone could be speculating in the motive of specific actors, giving interpretation, or expressing opinions not attributed to any source. Examples of calls for action could be advertising demonstrations or signatures of citizen law propositions, and degradation could be derogatory language or stereotypes about one or more specific religious, ethnic, social, or political groups, or sexual minorities. Text bits where instances of explicit media- or political criticism, commentary tone, calls for action, or degradation were identified were subsequently subject to close-reading textual analysis. In articles where most of the text possessed the above characteristics, representative examples were selected for close-reading textual analysis. All examples from the articles cited in the analysis are translated by the author.

Analysis of the structure

Membership of the press-ethics council and official stances on neutrality

The insights from the analysis of structure are summarized in Table 2. Half of the investigated alternative media are members of *Pressenævnet* and thereby formally commit and subject themselves to the press-ethical rules of professional journalism, while the other half are not. Because membership of the press-ethics council is not mandatory but optional for born-digital news sites, this can be interpreted as active decisions to signal either commitment to or rejection of these ethical guidelines. At the same time, the press-ethics council cannot refuse specific outlets membership. Therefore, the decision to become members can also be seen as a strategy employed for drawing on the legitimacy associated with professional

journalism. While the press-ethics council can investigate the conduct of its member outlets of its own accord, the council is, in practice, mainly reactive and takes up cases following complaints from involved parties. Thus, membership does not necessarily equate following the rules, nor does non-membership bear witness to breach of these rules. This remains an empirical question.

Only five of the investigated outlets provide official statements that give an indication of their stance on the professional journalistic norm of neutrality. *Kontrast* states that it will report from, for and on “non-socialist¹ Denmark,” which will be reflected in their choice of topics, while *Solidaritet* states that they are not neutral. These statements should not necessarily be interpreted as opposition to the norm of neutrality, however, but could be seen as reflecting perceptions that their own biases are necessary counterbalances to the perceived biases in mainstream media (see also Ihlebæk et al., 2022). More radically, *24NYT*, *NewSpeek*, and *Konfront* openly challenge the notion of neutrality. For instance, *24NYT* states that “We believe that we should be open about values we hold, rather than hiding behind a veneer of ‘unbiased’ coverage”, while *Konfront* “[...] reject[s] the idea of objectivity [...] the mainstream press’ fetishization of objectivity way too often serves the agendas of capitalism and imperialism, while feigning neutrality.” The analysis of the structure thus shows that some alternative media draw on the legitimacy associated with the rules and norms of professional journalism by formally committing and subjecting themselves to them, whereas others reject and, in some cases, de-legitimize them. Notably, left-wing and right-wing cases can be found in both groups.

Media mainstream			Political mainstream	
	Member of Pressenævnet	Official position on norm of neutrality	Official political stance	Political ties
24NYT	No	Challenges notion of unbiased news coverage.	Conservative, non-socialist. “Unapologetically” pro-Brexit, pro-Israel, against socialism and Muslim immigration	<i>Personal:</i> Founder, Jeppe Juhl, launched candidacy for right-wing party New Right while still being editor for 24NYT.

			(among others). States political independence.	Declared in 2019 that collaboration stopped. Content-producer is former member of New Right.
180Grader	Yes	None provided.	Non-socialist-liberal. States political independence.	<i>Personal:</i> Founded by later MP for right-wing party Liberal Alliance, Ole Birk Olesen, no longer editor-in-chief.
Den Korte Avis	No	None provided.	None provided.	<i>Personal:</i> Founders Ralf Pittelkow and Karen Jespersen were previously political advisor to and MP for center-left party Social Democrats respectively. Overlapping with role as editor, Jespersen was MP for center-right party Denmark's Liberal Party*.
ditOverblik	Yes	None provided.	Non-socialist-national.	<i>Organizational:</i> Launched and funded by Danish People's Party.
Document	No**	None provided.	Ambition of being "organ	<i>Personal:</i> Content-

			for the new right.”	producer ran for far-right party Hard Line in 2019.
FOLKETS	No	None provided.	Wants greater popular sovereignty, protects Danish freedom of mind and property rights.	None discernible.
Indblik	Yes	None provided.	Supports freedom of citizens and the productive Denmark.	<i>Personal:</i> Editor-in-chief founded Covid-19-critical protest organization, formerly held positions in right-wing party Liberal Alliance’s youth division.
Konfront	No	Rejects notion of objectivity.	“[B]ased in and exists in and for the Danish radical left-wing.” Declared fundamental distrust in parliamentary institutions, revolutionary hopes.	<i>Organizational:</i> Declares collaboration with far-left political organizations.
Kontrast	Yes	Ambition of reporting from, for and on “non-socialist Denmark” reflected in	Non-socialist.	None discernible.

		choice of topics.		
Netavisen Pio	Yes	None provided.	Democratic-socialist. States political independence.	<i>Organizational and personal:</i> Social Democrats and traditional labor unions (see appendix C).
New-Speak	No	Declares that content is influenced by personal opinions, will not hide behind "false neutrality or fake objectivity".	Non-socialist.	<i>Personal:</i> Content producers ran for far-right party Danish Unity in 2017 and is former member of right-wing party New Right, respectively.
Solidaritet	Yes	"[N]ot politically neutral."	Socialist, feminist, radical democrats. States political independence.	<i>Organizational and personal:</i> Red-Green Alliance (see appendix C).

Table 2: Positions vis-a-vis the media- and political mainstream in the structure

Note: The table reflects membership status, official stances, and political ties at the point of the sampling in June 2021. See full overview over political ties and references in [appendix C](#).

* Poul Erik Andersen, member of the Islam Critical Network in the Church of Denmark creates content for Den Korte Avis (Mayerhöffer 2021), but was not on byline in the article sample analyzed in this study.

** Editor-in-chief, Hans Rustad, was accepted into the Norwegian Association of Editors in 2018 as editor of Norwegian Document.no (Ihlebak & Nygaard 2021).

Official political stances and political ties

Turning to their official political stances, *Den Korte Avis* is the only of the investigated outlets that makes no mention at all of a political stance, which could be interpreted as a way of signaling political independence. On the right-wing, *Indblik* and *FOLKETS* do not directly state ideological stances but declare support for freedom of

citizens and the productive Denmark, and for protection of Danish freedom of mind and property rights respectively, indicating liberalist stances. *FOLKETS* additionally declares support for “more popular sovereignty,” thereby invoking populist notions of a political mainstream where ordinary people have too little say over political matters. *180Grader*, *Kontrast*, *ditOverblik*, and *NewSpeek* all cite variants of non-socialist stances. Compared to this, *Document* and *24NYT* take positions further to the right. The former states an ambition of being an “organ for the new right,” while the latter among other things declares itself “unapologetically” pro-Brexit, pro-Israel, and “unapologetically against” Muslim migration to Europe, thereby insinuating that these positions are something you must excuse inside the political mainstream.

On the left-wing, *Netavisen Pio* declares a democratic-socialist stance. Taking a position comparatively further to the left, *Solidaritet* declares themselves radical democrats who work “for freedom and socialism and against capitalism, fascism, and imperialism” as well as against “the capitalist class society.” More radically, *Konfront* states that it exists for the radical left and stands out with declared rejection of representative democracy and “fundamental distrust in the existing system’s institutions, including the judiciary, the police, parliamentary and state institutions, the press, etc.” Thereby, it does not only position itself further towards the fringes of the ideological spectrum than the other left-wing outlets, but also questions the legitimacy of the entire political system.

The official stances advocated by the investigated alternative media thus span the ideological spectrum, not only in the sense that left-wing and right-wing positions are represented, but also in the sense that some of the investigated cases take stances comparatively further to the left- or right than others. The analysis also shows that some of the outlets signal their stance by implicitly or explicitly addressing and positioning themselves critically against a political mainstream. While most of the outlets declare political stances, *180Grader*, *24NYT*, *Netavisen Pio*, and *Solidaritet* at the same time state editorial independence from organizational and/or party-political interests. In doing so, they mimic Danish national dailies, which are party-politically independent but have ideological leanings (Hjarvard 2010). This could be interpreted as a strategy of outward normalization.

Most of the investigated alternative media have tighter or looser organizational or personal ties to political organizations or parties (full overview in [appendix C](#)). As examples of organizational ties, *Konfront* declares collaboration with far-left organizations as *Queerland*, *Antifa*, and *Feminist Self-defense*, *Solidaritet* has received financial support from left-wing party *Red Green Alliance*,

mainstream media have reported that *Netavisen Pio* received financial support from labor unions, and *ditOverblik* was launched and is funded by the right-wing *Danish People's Party*. Regarding personal ties, some of the alternative media were launched by former or later members of parliament. For instance, *180Grader* was launched by later MP for right-wing party *Liberal Alliance* Ole Birk Olesen, founder of *24NYT*, Jeppe Juhl, ran for right-wing party *New Right*, and co-founder of *Den Korte Avis*, Karen Jespersen, is a former MP for center-left party the *Social Democrats* and center-right party *Denmark's Liberal Party* (see also Mayerhöffer 2021). In all three cases, their roles as editors and political candidates or MPs partly overlapped in time. Personal ties also take the form of editors or content-producers having run for political parties. As examples, content-producers for *NewSpeek* and *Document*, Lone Nørgaard and Uwe Max Jensen, ran for far-right immigration-critical parties *Danish Unity* and *Hard Line* respectively, none of which are represented in parliament, and editor-in-chief for *Netavisen Pio* tried to run for the *Social Democrats* before becoming editor. Thus, as also pointed out by Mayerhöffer (2021, p. 130) “[t]he career profiles of some of the founders and editors are [...] characterized by a strong party-political component.” Notably, the political ties identified are with far-left and far-right as well as more centrist political parties and organizations. This diversity is interesting, as alternative media are often considered extreme. It should be pointed out, though, that alternative media do not necessarily align with the political parties or organizations they have (in some cases previous) ties to. This is perhaps best exemplified by *Den Korte Avis*, which is considered markedly more right-wing than co-founder Karen Jespersen’s previous MP-positions for the *Social Democrats* and *Denmark's Liberal Party* would suggest. Altogether, the analysis of political ties identifies notable overlaps between the Danish alternative media and political landscapes. As exceptions, *FOLKETS* and *Kontrast* had no discernable political ties at the point of sampling.

Analysis of the content

Ideological agendas advocated in alternative media news content

The analysis now turns to the question of what ideological agendas the investigated alternative media advocate in their news content. *ditOverblik*, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, *180Grader*, *24NYT*, and *NewSpeek* can be considered what Holt (2016) labels immigration-critical alternative media. Similar to previous findings (e.g., Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019), these outlets portray Danish society as threatened by (predominantly Muslim) immigration and

advocate immigration-critical stances. This manifests itself in high prioritization of the topic immigration covered from a negative angle, for example by focusing on crime committed by immigrants. While these are shared traits, the immigration-criticism is markedly more vehement in *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeek*. These outlets write extensively about an alleged on-going Islamization of Europe and Denmark, such as here: “A rapid Islamization of society is taking place. Immigrant clans are developing their own parallel power system, which is growing stronger and stronger” (*Den Korte Avis*). Thereby, they create the impression that Danish culture might be displaced by a culture of Muslim immigrants portrayed as uncivilized and incompatible with democratic rights. For instance, *Den Korte Avis* refers to Arabs’ “clan- and warrior-society” and *NewSpeek* calls Islam a “[...] women-oppressing, homo-hating, freedom-hating, and democracy-hating movement.” More radically, *Document* and *NewSpeek* make references to “the great replacement,” a theory often associated with white nationalism positing that the white European population is being replaced by Muslim immigrants, while *NewSpeek* suggests that there is a pact between the European left-wing and Muslim organizations to overthrow democracy.

The article sample from *Kontrast* is small, but five of the seven articles from the outlet focus on gender and minority rights, reflecting a theme production on these topics. Several of these articles are one-source interviews where the quoted sources convey the image that issues of gender-inequality are being exaggerated in Denmark and that the MeToo-movement was marked by “feminist revenge.” A comparatively more radical version of this stance is advocated in *Document* where it is explicitly stated that societal norms in Denmark are undergoing fundamental change: “Today, Danes are subject to a strict moral code shaped by, among others, the left-wing’s metoo-army which has subjected the masses to an identity-policy life perspective.” Thus, Danish culture is again portrayed as threatened, only by left-wing woke culture. Reflecting that the sampling period was between two Covid-19 lockdowns, *Indblik* and *180Grader* devote much attention to Covid-19. However, their angles on the topic more generally reflect liberalist state-critical agendas with critical coverage of state-limitations of personal liberties and excessive public spending during the lockdowns.

Turning to the left-wing outlets, one of the most prominent topics in *Netavisen Pio* is (un)employment covered from an angle largely positive towards the social-democratic government and labor unions. This is in line with *Netavisen Pio*’s political ties to these actors and suggests alignment with their political agendas, as also found in a previous study (Brems, 2022). Placing itself comparatively further to the left, *Solidaritiet* features stark anti-capitalist advocacy and

conversely portrays society as permeated by capitalist logics. For instance, one article states that “Globalization discourses such as economic rationalism and neo-conservatism are ideologies that increasingly dominate our understandings of education” while another features use of socialist vocabulary like “the capital.” The more left-wing stance is also reflected in the topics they cover, such as alleged greenwashing and police-violence against left-wing protesters.

The analysis thus shows that within the groups of left-wing and right-wing alternative media, the investigated cases focus on different agendas and that it differs whether they orient on so-called culture wars and/or more classic divides over economic policy. Additionally, it varies whether any negative portrayals regard specific parts of the population (which is especially the case in some of the right-wing outlets), authorities, and/or allegedly dominant ideologies. The findings also highlight the important point that alternative media that advocate the same overall agendas can promote more moderate or radical versions hereof. Notably, the ideological agendas advocated in the content only partly correspond to the outlets’ official ideological stances. For instance, *Den Korte Avis* takes no official ideological stance but advocates stark anti-immigration stances. Likewise, the immigration-critical agenda promoted by *NewSpeak* must be considered markedly more radical than its declared non-socialist stance indicates. This could be interpreted as a strategy of downplaying extremity in their official stances to signal that the agendas advocated in their content should not be considered extreme.

Journalistic style

As the analysis above indicates, the investigated outlets employ different journalistic styles in their news content. Although based on a small sample, *Kontrast* stands out as the only outlet making no use of commentary tone, calls for action, or degradation. In this regard, this outlet adopts a neutral journalistic style. However, this could be interpreted as a strategy of creating an appearance of objectivity (see Nygaard, 2019; Klawier et al., 2022) where (selected) facts speak for themselves or quoted sources deliver the political messages, for example that feminism has become too radical. *Netavisen Pio* displays a partial adoption of a neutral journalistic style. The outlet features no calls for action or degradation, and commentary tone is present in less than a third of the articles. When it is, it mainly takes the form of giving interpretation of political events or providing grounds for the politics of the social-democratic government, to which the outlet has political ties.

More widespread use of a commentary tone is found in *Solidaritet*, *Indblik*, *180Grader*, *ditOverblik*, and *24NYT*, which features in between a third and close to all their articles. This can take the form of interpretation as in *Netavisen Pio*, but with more direct advocacy in favor of specific political stances and explicitly telling the readers how to understand political events. Referring to a letter sent by scientists calling for investigation of the origin of Covid-19, *Indblik* for instance states that “[t]he theory of a possible leak from a Chinese lab was originally dismissed as a conspiracy theory. But the letter from the scientists shows that a potential lab leak must be taken seriously.” Commentary tone is also manifest in *Solidaritet*’s use of collective “we” when talking about the pro-Palestinian movement and in the use of irony, for instance in *180Grader*: “Sweden is now Europe’s most shooting-mad country – but this has nothing to do with immigration, says Swedish researcher.” None of these outlets feature instances of degradation, however, and only *24NYT* makes two calls for action, both of which seem to be the result of copy-pasting press releases from NGO’s without labeling them as such, in line with previous findings (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2021).

Standing out from the rest of the outlets, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeek* display stark deviation from the norm of neutrality. A commentary tone is used in between two thirds and all of their articles, *NewSpeek* features calls for action, and setting them markedly apart from the other investigated alternative media between five and ten articles in the samples feature degradation of Muslims and Arabs. For instance, *Den Korte Avis* refers to Muslims as behaving like “the master race,” a term also used to denote the Nazi view that the Aryan race was superior to others; *Document* uses the term “Muslim settlers” and refers to the 2015 immigration crisis as “the invasion,” suggesting that immigrants wage war against European countries; and *NewSpeek* calls Muslims a “barbarian movement.” The degradation also takes the form of crude generalizations. For instance, *NewSpeek* suggests that immigrants are less intelligent than Europeans and violent: “It is possible that most men-citizens [from the Middle-East and North-Africa] would not give positive results in a pisa-test [used for testing school kids], but the conqueror-appetite and the general contempt for the West is deeply rooted in them.” As the analysis demonstrates, the equivalent of this form of advocacy of ideological agendas through degradation of a specific group in society was not found in the investigated left-wing outlets, but it should be emphasized that degradation was also not found in the other investigated right-wing outlets.

Media criticism

Kontrast, *Indblik*, and *ditOverblik* stand out with no instances of explicit media criticism. This highlights the important point that the oppositional relation to mainstream media that defines alternative media does not necessarily translate into blatant attacks on their credibility. This does not necessarily mean that these alternative media are uncritical of their mainstream counterparts: Like the adoption of a neutral journalistic style, it could be considered a strategy of appearing more mainstream and carrying out a form of implicit criticism by delivering the coverage they find missing in mainstream media.

Turning to the seven of the investigated alternative media that do feature explicit criticism of their mainstream counterparts, its severity and aims vary. The most modest form of criticism is found in *Netavisen Pio*. It occurs in only one article in the sample where mainstream media in general are criticized for low quality in their culture journalism, citing results from an MA thesis. Harsher criticism is found in *Solidaritët*, *24NYT*, and *180Grader*. All three criticize mainstream media for right-wing or left-wing bias. However, in *Solidaritët* and *180Grader*, the criticism is restricted to either U.S. mainstream media in general or specific Danish mainstream media. In *24NYT*, the criticism is directed at Danish mainstream media in general, but voiced by quoted journalistic or political sources and thus not by *24NYT*. This and the above-mentioned example from *Netavisen Pio* resemble a strategy of outsourcing mainstream media criticism to other actors, thereby giving it greater credibility (Cushion, 2021). In addition to allegations of left-wing bias, *180Grader* recurrently refers to the national broadcaster TV2 as “the state medium,” thereby insinuating that it lacks independence from the government and serves as a tool for political powerholders.

The far most severe explicit criticism is found in *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeek*. Their points of criticism include left-wing bias, pro-immigration advocacy, and political correctness similar to those in Norwegian right-wing alternative media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). In addition to this, these outlets make use of name-calling using terms as “journalistic left-wing party,” “red propagandists,” and “the liar press.” *Den Korte Avis* and *Document* also criticize omission of immigration problems, while *Document* and *NewSpeek* assert that mainstream media are not politically independent and act as tools for Islam. In other words, they assert that mainstream media fail to report on the alleged threat from immigration, and *NewSpeek* and *Document* also place responsibility with mainstream media for actively contributing to the purported ongoing Islamization of Europe. For instance, *NewSpeek* states that:

[...] the politically correct media world's actions can cause an opinion formation that in the long run will cause an entirely or completely Islamized Europe. It happens via influencing opinions in favor of immigration.

NewSpeak also criticizes lack of critical journalism and makes allegations of censorship of immigration-critical and Covid-19-critical voices. The criticism in these three outlets is directed at both specific Danish mainstream media, Danish mainstream media in general, journalists in general and, in one instance in *Document*, at a specific named journalist. Thus, these outlets actively undercut the legitimacy of the mainstream media system. None of these outlets are members of the press-ethics council, indicating some overlap between official rejection of the ethical rules and norms of professional journalism and the vehemence of the criticism voiced in alternative media's content.

Political criticism

The analysis identified three overall forms of explicit political criticism in the investigated outlets' news content: Party-political criticism of specific actors within the political system, criticism of political actors in general or of the political system as a whole, and radical distrust. Party-political criticism was found in all investigated outlets apart from *Kontrast*, and covers a range of different strategies employed for delegitimizing specific party-political actors. Examples include criticism of parties or politicians for flip-flopping, acting out of accordance with their own ideology, breaking political promises, or being unwilling to answer critical questions, accusations of hypocrisy, alleging untruthful statements, or name-calling. Here, alternative media act as partisans taking sides within the mainstream political system by aiming criticism at political opponents, at competitors to the parties they have ties to (especially in *ditOverblik*), or by policing ideological deviance of parties from the same political side.

Criticism of political actors in general or of the political system as a whole was found in *24NYT*, *Indblik*, *Solidaritet*, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeak*. This criticism is aimed at politicians in general for being hypocritical, unintelligent, untrustworthy or lying, or deceiving the voters. For instance, *24NYT* states that:

In order to create an illusion that they have an iron-hard immigration policy, the political parties in parliament have passed legislation allowing the applications for asylum to take place outside of Denmark [...]. The politicians'

statement that they will move the applications for asylum to other countries is nothing but spin, symbolic policy and deceiving the voters.

This conveys the image that politicians cannot be trusted and even when they pass promised legislation this is just to trick the voters. Other manifestations are criticism of authorities and civil servants for not acting neutrally or lacking qualifications for taking care of Denmark's interests internationally.

Finally, radical distrust in politicians and the political system is voiced by *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeak*. In addition to the above, they criticize authorities for embracing Islam, construct divides between the political – or media or expert – elite and the people, and *NewSpeak* questions the legitimacy of the judiciary system. Similar to their criticism of mainstream media, *Document* and *NewSpeak* also criticize politicians in general for embracing or being useful idiots for Islam and thereby contributing to the alleged Islamization of the Danish and European societies. Most radically, *NewSpeak* asserts that political powerholders used the Covid-19 crisis as disguise for taking world control, and speculates that politicians will force people to get the vaccine:

In reality, it will be forced vaccination. Because if you do not do as they say and take the shots, your son will not be able to get an education, and if you do not fall in line, you will lose your job [...]. The globalists have waited for this opportunity to 'mark people' – and now it is here.

Taken together, the analysis of explicit media- and political criticism shows that alternative media do not only position themselves differently vis-à-vis the mainstream but that some of the outlets through their explicit criticism also construct much more hostile portrayals of the mainstream they profess to counter.

Discussion and conclusion

Alternative media are often discussed as a group defined by their shared opposition to the media- and political mainstream. Against this backdrop, the findings from the study suggest that alternative media within the same media- and political system can take markedly different positions vis-à-vis the mainstream, which they can also construct in different ways. Thereby, the study adds to a growing body of work suggesting that alternative media are a heterogeneous group (e.g., Heft et al., 2020; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021). This is in line with the theoretical notion that the alternative-mainstream schism is not binary but a matter of degree. Positioned

closest to the mainstream, some of the investigated alternative media commit to the ethical rules and norms of professional journalism, wholly or partly adopt a neutral journalistic style, advocate more moderate versions of ideological agendas, and explicit media- and political criticism is absent or moderate. Positioned furthest from the mainstream, other alternative media reject and de-legitimize ethical rules and norms of professional journalism, starkly deviate from a neutral journalistic style, advocate more radical versions of ideological agendas also through degradation of specific societal groups, and actively undercut the legitimacy of and voice radical distrust in the media- and political systems.

These contrasting positions can be interpreted as an indication that alternative media can pursue strategies of seeking to be perceived as legitimate correctives and partisans positioned close to or within the media- and political mainstream, or of de-legitimizing the media- and political systems from positions as clear outsiders. However, as the findings show, this is not a clear-cut divide, as it varies where on the spectrum the investigated cases position themselves, also depending on what indicator is assessed. This is mirrored, for instance, in the finding that some alternative media refrain from explicit media criticism but employ an overtly commentary journalistic style, placing them closer to or further from the mainstream based on these respective indicators.

The study finds that both left-wing and right-wing alternative media can take more or less oppositional positions vis-à-vis the mainstream. Even so, the three right-wing outlets *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeek* stand out with the far-most radical oppositional position, mirrored especially in their degradation of Muslims and Arabs and their vehement criticism of the media and political mainstream. The equivalent of this was not found in the left-wing outlets. This could be interpreted as a difference in how the oppositional relation to the media- and political mainstream and ideological partisanship play out in left-wing and right-wing alternative media, but importantly also highlights the considerable heterogeneity within the group of right-wing alternative media, which span the spectrum of alternativeness. Moreover, this seeming left/right-difference should be viewed in the light that fewer left-wing cases were included.

The diverging positions the investigated alternative media take vis-à-vis the mainstream are in line with the proposition that we might see a development where some alternative media “radicalize” and emphasize their opposition to the mainstream, while others “normalize” and become less alternative (Heft et al., 2020). This is interesting in light of ongoing debates on how alternative media might influence the media- and political systems they enter. On the

one hand, taking positions closer to the mainstream could be interpreted as a strategy of advancing their ideological agendas by drawing on the legitimacy of professional journalism (see also Nygaard, 2019, Klawier et al., 2022). This could make it more difficult to distinguish between alternative and mainstream (Heft et al., 2020), particularly in the Danish context where national dailies also have ideological leanings that are reflected in choice of topics and angles (Hjarvard, 2010). On the other hand, alternative media that advocate more radical versions of ideological agendas, make use of degradation, blatantly attack the legitimacy of mainstream media, and express radical distrust in politicians and the political system arguably have greater potential for fueling extreme political attitudes and contributing to erosion of media- and political trust. Finally, the finding that most alternative media have some ties to political actors suggest that alternative media might represent a revival of political parallelism in the Danish media system and emphasizes that alternative media are media-*political* actors whose roles and potentials for impact must be understood through their relation to the media- as well as political mainstream.

Lastly, some weaknesses should be addressed. The study only included news content from alternative media and more blatant media- and political criticism and advocacy of more radical political agendas could be present in opinion pieces. Moreover, the study focused on comparing the investigated alternative media to each other but did not directly compare their structure and content to that of mainstream media, or the ideological agendas they advocate to those of political actors. Therefore, the results cannot be used for placing the alternative media relative to the mainstream in absolute terms. Finally, the qualitative analysis was based on small article samples and its depth comes at the expense of its generalizability. By addressing these issues, future research could further our understanding of alternative media's place in the media- and political systems they enter.

NOTE

¹ In Denmark, non-socialist designates parties that do not have a socialist foundation and can capture anything from center parties to the far-right.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Unni From and Rune Stubager (Aarhus University) and the organizers and participants of the ECREA pre-

conference “Trends and Challenges in Nordic Journalism (Research)” for valuable feedback on early versions of the article. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments to the article.

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