

## **Beyond Breitbart**

Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies

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## **Beyond Breitbart: Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies**

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Right-wing online news media have in many countries emerged as an important force in the media landscape, positioning themselves as an alternative to a perceived political and media mainstream. This article studies these sites as a cornerstone of right-wing digital news infrastructures in six Western democracies (Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the UK, and the US). Drawing on content analyses of websites and social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter as well as on audience metrics, the article analyses content supply and audience demand structures, as well as organizational and thematic characteristics of 70 alternative right-wing online news sites. We find that a country's media and political context, in particular the representation of right-wing positions in the political and legacy media sphere, can explain variation in the supply of and demand for right-wing news across countries, but is mitigated by transnational audiences. At the same time, we can account for cross-national heterogeneity of news sites, ranging from sites with a "normalized" appearance to more radical sites that clearly set themselves apart from legacy news outlets in terms of their thematic categories, their funding strategy, and their organizational transparency, leading to various types of digital right-wing "alternatives" to mainstream news.

**KEY WORDS:** digital news infrastructures, online right-wing media, alternative media, comparative media studies, hyper-partisan media

### **Introduction**

The rise of right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe and the Trump presidency in the United States not only provide a challenge to established parliamentary politics, but also to traditional mass media as a

cornerstone of democratic societies. Legacy media are confronted with decreasing levels of trust among the public, while right-wing actors and their supporters habitually accuse established media institutions of being too closely aligned with a political mainstream. In this context, online news sites—such as *Breitbart*, the German *Compact* magazine and Swedish *Nyheter Idag*—have in many countries emerged as a new force in the media landscape. Also referred to as “hyper-partisan media,” these right-wing online news media provide an alternative to legacy or mainstream media sources in times of high-choice media environments and rely on digital platforms to establish a new media infrastructure on the political right. The emergence of these partisan digital news sites is followed by an underlying concern that these sites and their social media appearances, in their entirety, provide a new infrastructure through which right-wing ideologies can be dispersed and around which communities can develop, which may foster further polarization and radicalization of political views within and across national and transnational public spheres—especially since their most committed audiences may be increasingly unlikely to be exposed directly to the so-called mainstream media (Benkler *et al.*, 2017; Newman *et al.*, 2017).

This study provides a closer and comparative look at this new digital news infrastructure on the political right by analyzing 70 European and US-American right-wing online news sites (RNS) and their accompanying social media accounts. All of these are marked by hyper-partisanship and a professed ambition to present an alternative to more established or “mainstream” news sources. With their claim to challenge power structures and their stance of being an alternative to a media mainstream they display features of the “alternative media” (Atkinson and Berg, 2012; Haller, Holt and de La Brosse, 2019). While they attract significant amounts of user attention, as of yet there exist no comprehensive, comparative accounts of the characteristics of this news infrastructure, understood as the supply and demand of right-wing digital news, as well as its dissociation from legacy media in terms of organizational strategy and thematic tendency. The infrastructural perspective on this distinct political information environment (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017) on the right highlights its foundational and enabling character as opportunity structure for the diffusion of and interaction with right-wing news under digital conditions.

As these news infrastructures are subject to important contextual conditions, we analyze right-wing digital news sites in six countries featuring distinct political and media contexts: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and the US. Proceeding from the assumption that the embeddedness in particular media and political contexts is decisive for the emergence of specific news environments, we seek to answer the following two research questions: (1) Which commonalities and differences exist in the supply and demand of right-wing digital news in these six different countries, and how do these patterns correspond to variations in the media and political context? (2) Can distinct types of RNS be identified, and are these

types country-specific or emerging cross-nationally?

### **Studying Right-Wing Alternative Online News Media**

Despite being a rather new phenomenon, right-wing alternative news sites have rapidly become a cornerstone of the broader right-wing digital news infrastructure: Where right-wing ideology and news previously have been disseminated mainly by right-wing organizations, movements and parties, as well as through blogs and pundits, the last decade has seen a rise in numbers of websites that mark themselves as journalistic outlets in their own right, in opposition to merely delivering opinion- or movement-driven forms of communication (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018; Newman *et al.*, 2018). With few exceptions, these news outlets on the political right show clear characteristics of so-called “alternative” or “radical” media, i.e. media “that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing, 2001, v). Previously applied predominantly to progressive counter-hegemonic media, the term alternative media is increasingly used in current research to also denominate “repressive” or even anti-democratic media positioning themselves against a perceived societal mainstream (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2006; Haller, Holt and de La Brosse, 2019). It is argued that the broad spectrum of alternative media is best understood and analysed in relational terms and thus “should be considered first and foremost in the light of a position as a *self-perceived corrective* of ‘traditional’, ‘legacy’ or ‘mainstream’ news media in a given socio-cultural and historical context” (Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich, 2019)<sup>1</sup>.

The rise of such alternative and hyper-partisan media coincides more or less directly with the surge of populist movements, parties and governments seen in many established democracies during the last decades. This is not to say that alternative and hyper-partisan media should be seen as “populist media” by default. The degree to which such media actually support populist agendas or resort to populist forms of communication and rhetoric remains an empirical question.

While we thus regard alternative media and populism as distinct phenomena, it is clear that the rise and role of alternative media must be seen in conjunction with the populist agenda currently gaining momentum around the globe. Just as populism is understood as a “thin ideology,” centered around a distinction between

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<sup>1</sup>In consequence, this understanding of alternative media puts less emphasis on concepts traditionally evoked when defining and discussing the concept of alternative media in a progressive or left-wing context, such as active citizenship and citizen empowerment (Harcup, 2011; Fenton and Barassi 2011), but focuses on dissatisfaction with the existing media environment as the defining element for different types of alternative media.

the people and a corrupt elite and a focus on the will of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), alternative media are defined not by their attachment to a particular ideology or orientation, but rather by their anti-establishment position and contrast to legacy media (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2007; Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich, 2019).

However, just as the thin ideology of populism is more or less invariably attached to “thick” ideologies by concrete populist parties and movements, many alternative media are also hyper-partisan media with clear ideological attachments. For alternative media on the political right this results in a combination of an anti-hegemonic impetus and positions generally associated with right-wing ideology, such as conservatism, nationalism, economic liberalism, and—to the far right—authoritarianism, xenophobia, islamophobia, racism, anti-semitism, fascism and nativism (Eatwell, 1989; Rydgren, 2018). Given their anti-hegemonic outlook, right-wing alternative media are in most cases ideologically placed at the fringes of the established center-right and right-wing political spectrum, taking stances and positions associated with labels such as “new right,” “alt-right,” “right-wing populist,” “far right” or even “extreme right.”

This gravitation toward political extremes clearly has a potential to increase polarization in both the political and the media sphere (Levendusky, 2013; Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018). This is not only a matter of alternative media on the political right, as demonstrated by (albeit fewer) left-wing hyper-partisan online news outlets. However, alternative media also display a broader tendency associated with populism: the subjugation of traditional left/right polarization under the opposition between the people and those understood by populists to represent “the elite.” Indeed, some of the sites included in our study—such as the British *Spiked* or German *Compact*—have roots in the radical left-wing scene, but now oppose the political establishment from a position on the right side of the spectrum. In this way, RNS can be assumed to contribute to a deepening gap between alternative news audiences and a “corrupt” political and media establishment in a way that reflects the populist dynamics of social and political polarization (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, 1682).

Despite their increasing importance, research on RNS is still quite sparse. A number of studies have focused on related aspects, such as the spread of disinformation and fake news (e.g. Fletcher *et al.*, 2018), extreme-right groups’ use of the Internet (e.g. Caiani and Kröll, 2015; Simpson and Druxes, 2015; Askanius, 2019), and media populism (Krämer, 2017a, 2017b). However, only a few studies have analyzed hyper-partisan alternative media outlets and their critical role in the emergence of digital news infrastructures.

Notable recent research on RNS has primarily been conducted in the US and focused on networked disinformation flows and spill-overs between RNS and mainstream media during the 2016 presidential campaign (Anderson, 2010;

Benkler *et al.*, 2017; 2018), as well as topical similarities between various types of right-wing online media (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch and Bourassa, 2018). Benkler *et al.*'s (2017, 2018) study on the right-wing news ecosystem showed how the website *Breitbart* arose as a central node on key issues within an informational network of right-wing ideological views during the 2016 election. These digitally enabled networks of hyper-partisan content providers have allowed for decentralized modes of disinformation campaigns, so-called "networked propaganda." Based on topic modeling analysis, Kaiser, Rauchfleisch and Bourassa (2018) demonstrate how specific online media outlets like *Breitbart* function as bridges between more moderate or mainstream forms of media and the far-right.

Research findings beyond the US context are sparser. Focusing on aspects of media criticism and media distrust as a fundament of so-called "immigrant-critical alternative media" in Sweden, Holt (2016, 2018) argues that this alternative news environment is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity that is best analyzed in terms of the degree of "anti-systemness" exhibited by the different outlets in their communication on various platforms. Research on German-language RNS has so far mainly focused on their print editions, disregarding the increasing use of digital platforms by these outlets. Studies on outlets such as *Junge Freiheit* (Braun and Vogt, 2007; von Nordheim, Müller and Scheppe, 2019) or *Compact* (Schilk, 2017) show how these "new right" outlets challenge conventional understandings of right-wing ideology and rhetoric by adapting a populist style of communication and seeking linkages to left-wing movements (*Compact*), as well as by establishing a bridge between right-wing conservative and extreme-right positions (*Junge Freiheit*).

Our study adds a comparative perspective to this emerging field of research on RNS, which considers the full spectrum of right-wing alternative digital news outlets, rather than focusing only on the most prominent outlets in each country. Thus, it contributes to a thorough understanding of the entirety of this new infrastructure and the contextual conditions shaping it.

## **The Context Dependency of Digital News Infrastructures**

Our study draws on research characterizing media and political information environments as determined by context factors within a specific society (Brüggemann *et al.*, 2014; Humprecht and Esser, 2017; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). While this literature analyzes the supply and demand of political news and political information *in general*, our study proposes a number of more specific contextual conditions which are assumed to directly account for different patterns of *right-wing* digital news infrastructures.

First, high levels of media polarization in (online and offline) legacy media, as well as the inclusiveness of legacy media towards right-wing actors and positions

are likely to make it harder for RNS to fill a market niche and attract audience attention. Secondly, and in a similar vein, trust in mainstream news might influence the demand and thus prospects of alternative online news providers on the right. Research for various countries consistently shows that the audiences who identify as right leaning are typically deeply distrustful of the news in general and are therefore more likely to use alternative media (Newman *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, regarding political contexts, the electoral success of right-wing parties and their participation in (or support of) governments can be seen as indicators of public tolerance towards far-right and right-wing populist positions, and thus for the extent to which such positions have institutionalized access to (mediated) public debate. In contexts where far-right and right-wing populist positions are marginalized in the public debate, niche media on the right might be more likely to flourish. This refers not only to the sheer quantity of RNS, but also to other characteristics of those media such as their organizational transparency, thematic tendency, or funding strategies.

To test these assumptions, our study analyzes RNS in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US. In all of these countries, online news is either the most important or, in the German case, second-most important news source (Newman *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the RNS analyzed in this study all target audiences that frequently consume digital news. At the same time, these countries represent different types of media systems (Brüggemann *et al.*, 2014) and differ in their political context, in particular with regard to the acceptance of far-right positions within the political sphere (see overview in Table 1).

### *Political Context*

Sweden and Germany represent countries in which more extreme right-wing positions are currently still rather marginalized. In Germany, the radical right had been relatively weak for decades (Arzheimer, 2009). Since 2013, however, the newly founded right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been on the rise (Arzheimer, 2015), reaching a vote share of almost 13 percent in the 2017 general election.<sup>2</sup> In Sweden, after decades in which radical right-wing parties had been comparatively unsuccessful, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (SD) have been continuously rising in political importance since entering the national parliament in 2010 (Strömbäck, Jungar and Dahlberg, 2017). Despite gaining 17.5 percent of votes in the 2018 general election,<sup>3</sup> they continue to be shunned by the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse.html> (03.07.2019).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-landsting-och-kommun/2018/valresultat.html> (03.07.2019)

remaining political parties, not least due to their roots in the white national movement.

In contrast, the acceptance of more extreme right-wing views is much more pronounced in Denmark and Austria. In Denmark, the (liberal-conservative) government has until recently depended on the support of the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (DF), which was the second strongest party in the 2015 election (21.1 percent). Despite suffering substantial losses in the June 2019 national election, DF must generally be regarded as an established force in Danish politics<sup>4</sup>. In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), a party with strong right-wing positions and the third strongest force in the general election of 2017 (26 percent),<sup>5</sup> has joined a governing coalition with the Austrian People's Party.<sup>6</sup>

While less clear-cut, more extreme right-wing views are also rather established in UK and US politics. Britain's UK Independence Party (UKIP), which in the 2015 general election had attained 12.6 percent of the vote, later fell into insignificance (2017 general election: 1.8 percent).<sup>7</sup> However, UKIP's political agenda has increasingly found its way into the ruling conservative party, which tends relatively strongly towards the right (Polk *et al.*, 2017), culminating not least in the Brexit referendum and the recent establishment of the 'Brexit party' at the European level. In the US, the success of sub-caucuses and coalitions within the Republican party structure, marked, for example, by the rise of the so-called Tea Party, can be seen as a gradual shift towards more extreme forms of right-wing politics (Mann and Ornstein, 2012). Arguably, the election of Trump in the 2016 election with 46 percent vote share<sup>8</sup> is a further indicator for an acceptance of a right-wing populist type of political agenda and style among the American public.<sup>9</sup>

### *Media Context*

The Swedish and German traditional mass media can be described as having

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/59/> (03.07.2019).

<sup>5</sup> <https://wahl17.bmi.gv.at/> (03.07.2019).

<sup>6</sup> In the wake of the 'Ibiza affair', the coalition has de facto collapsed in May 2019; elections are announced for September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7979#fullreport>. (23.07.2019).

<sup>8</sup> <https://transition.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2016/federalelections2016.pdf> (03.07.2019).

<sup>9</sup> While some of these differences in the acceptance of far right and right-wing populist positions certainly are due to different ideological, historical and personnel-based characteristics of the main political actors and parties representing these positions, they nevertheless provide an indicator for the degree to which such positions can be voiced in the political sphere in each country.



a critical stance towards far-right and right-wing populist positions (e.g. Hellström and Hervik, 2014; Esser, Stepińska and Hopmann, 2017), which has not left much room for actors and positions from the far and populist right. In Germany, the critical tenor of the public media's reporting on right-wing actors can be explained by the country's historical context (Reinemann, 2017). In Sweden, the SD have also long been ostracized by the mainstream media. While the cordon sanitaire erected around the SD seems to have been wearing thin in recent years (Strömbäck, Jungar and Dahlberg, 2017), the presumed existence of a so-called "opinion corridor" limiting the range of issues and opinions expressed in mass media content remains a matter of public debate. Based on information about the political leaning of news audiences, Germany and Sweden display the lowest levels of online news media polarization (compared to the other countries in our sample), combined with a high level of trust in the German case (Newman *et al.*, 2017, 2018).<sup>10</sup>

Denmark and Austria, in contrast, provide mass media contexts that are favorable to right-wing actors and positions. In Denmark, a culture of public debate that allows for voicing of politically incorrect issues and opinions has resulted in a harsh tone of debate in the media, in particular with regard to immigration (Hellström and Hervik, 2014). Denmark's legacy media indirectly supports the DF by heavily focusing on immigration in their reporting, for which the DF has issue ownership (Esser, Stepińska and Hopmann, 2017). The Austrian mass media also have a market-focused and populist newsroom logic that helps right-wing and populist actors such as the FPÖ to get attention (Plasser and Ulram, 2003). In both countries, online news media polarization is considerably higher than in their neighboring countries of Germany and Sweden. Yet, despite a relatively high polarization, trust in news overall is high in Denmark.

The British mass media have a generally critical tone towards politicians and emphasize personalities, conflict, strategy and tactics (Esser, Stepińska and Hopmann, 2017). Wayne and Murray (2009, 416) ascribe a "populist antagonism towards politics that is personalized and anti-systemic in its focus" to UK television news. Popular newspapers, especially the highest-circulated *The Sun*, are expected to provide a favorable platform for populist politics (Akkerman, 2011). In the US, the current media landscape is marked by high degrees of fragmentation and ideological polarization (Hopkins and Ladd, 2014), which have given rise to a host of niche-oriented news sources, especially in cable television. Both in the UK and to an even more extreme degree in the US, online news polarization is high, while

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<sup>10</sup> The online news media polarization score is the mean of the polarization score for each of the top 15 online brands of a country (level of dispersion) multiplied by their weekly reach. See Newman *et al.* (2017, 40). All following data on the polarization score according to Newman *et al.* (2017). All data on trust in news according to the country chapters in Newman *et al.* (2018).

trust in news is relatively low.

Table 1: Overview of political and media context factors

Political and media context	Sweden	Denmark	Germany	Austria	UK	US
Political role of far-right / right-wing populist parties / politicians	Opposition party, rather marginalized, but increasing vote share	Government support party, rather established	Opposition party, rather marginalized	Government party, rather established	No consistent party-political role, but acceptance of right-wing positions in the political sphere	Government party, rather established
Media system	Northern Type	Northern Type	Central Type	Central Type	Western Type	Western Type
Mass media and populism	Dismissal / demarcation	(Unintended) complicity	Dismissal / demarcation	(Unintended) complicity	(Unintended) complicity / ideological partnership	(Unintended) complicity / ideological partnership
Online news media polarization <sup>1</sup>	2.34	2.83	1.64	2.62	3.18	5.93
Trust in news <sup>1</sup>	41%	56%	50%	41%	42%	34%

<sup>1</sup>Sources: Reuters Digital News Report 2017 and 2018; own compilation.

Summing up, Sweden and Germany present contexts in which the supply of and demand for right-wing news is most likely to rely on alternative modes of news production and dissemination. In Denmark and Austria, the incentives and demand for right-wing alternative media can in turn be expected to be less pronounced. In the UK, the lack of a strong, consistent right-wing populist party on the one hand and a media landscape that is inclusive of right-wing views on the other, suggest mixed potential for a flourishing alternative right-wing news scene. In the US, both the contextual conditions in the political and media sphere, where right-wing positions are well-established, would also suggest a rather limited potential for alternative right-wing online news. However, extremely low levels of trust in news

might fuel the supply of and demand for alternative news on the political right.

## Methods

### *Selection of Right-wing Online News Media*

We examine alternative online news media that distribute right-wing views via websites and their respective social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook. To identify RNS, we first compiled a list of potential RNS based on an extensive literature search on right-wing media, on information provided by monitoring organizations, fact-checking websites and watchdog lists concerned with right-wing activities in each country, as well as on input by country experts researching right-wing media and/or politics. This collection resulted in a list of around 150 sites, of which 70 sites were ultimately classified as RNS based on the following four criteria (see Table 1, Appendix, for a full list of RNS included in the study):

(1) By *online news media* we refer to digital news providers offering: (a) at least a rudimentary form of “institutionalized journalism” (Wolf, 2014, 72) by self-describing as a news media offer or by giving information on editorial responsibility; and (b) that provide current, non-fictional content with a given periodicity. With this definition, we exclude blogs, understood as a genre for online self-publishing by only one or a few people characterized by a chronological series of posts (Chandler and Munday, 2016) and often written in a conversational style. We explicitly focus on sites for which the main content is text-based, thus excluding online broadcasters and radio stations. We include media offers that feature an offline print version, as long as the website is not merely used for cross-promoting the print version.

(2) Following the definition proposed by Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich (2019), we categorize a given online news outlet as “alternative” based on the self-description of the news outlet as a corrective to a perceived political and media mainstream, i.e. if the front page or about section of the website or the social media channels features a self-description as alternative / different / anti-mainstream / revolutionary, and/or features (variants of) the following keywords and phrases: politically incorrect / controversial / provocative, “focusing on issues disregarded by other media”, “free of censorship / dedicated to the freedom of the press,” and “committed to the truth.”

(3) We classify an alternative online news site as right-wing if it: (a) explicitly declares a right-wing political standpoint on the front page or about section of the website or social media channels, either by calling itself right-wing, by referring to ideological positions associated with the political right, or by taking an explicit stance against the political left; and/or (b) that displays a right-wing thematic focus on the website’s front page, as made apparent in article tags, article

keywords or topical categories. We exclude libertarian, as well as religious sites, to make our selection more comparable internationally, as this is a particularly US-based phenomenon.

(4) We allocate RNS to one of the six countries under study by assessing the self-description, legal notice, contact data, top-level domain, and language profile of a site. We exclude genuinely transnational offers that do not have their head office in one of the above-mentioned countries.<sup>11</sup> We also exclude offers primarily targeted at regional and local communities.

*Indicators and measures.* Applying the concept of a political information environment (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017) to the partisan news niche of right-wing online news media, we analyzed supply- and demand-side indicators with respect to the identified RNS. Our analysis includes the websites of the 70 RNS, their Twitter and Facebook accounts (if they existed) and audience web metrics data made available through Alexa.com.

(1) Activity in content supply. With respect to the websites, we operationalize activity in content dissemination as the number of articles in a period of four weeks in June/July 2018, based on data collected through the Media Cloud database.<sup>12</sup> For Twitter, we assess the activity of a medium by the number of tweets in a period of four weeks (June 2018). Twitter data were automatically retrieved via DMI's Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (Borra and Rieder, 2014).<sup>13</sup>

(2) Audience demand. To measure website demand, we rely on data collected by Alexa, a company providing web audiences and traffic data<sup>14</sup> (Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez and González-Bailón, 2018). Since we deal with niche sites, we were not able to retrieve reliable estimated unique visitor data for all RNS. For a rough approximation on attention attracted, we rely on the rank a website has in a given country, providing information on whether a medium is among the top

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<sup>11</sup> Media with head office in one country and additional offices in other countries are classified as belonging to the head office's country.

<sup>12</sup> Media Cloud is an open source platform that collects news stories through the RSS feeds of online media sources. The platform is a project by the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University (<https://mediacloud.org>). We thank Annissa Pierre and Anushka Shah for support with setting up the country-based collections for the websites included in this study.

<sup>13</sup> Due to Facebook's newest API restrictions, it is currently only possible for us to draw on its data for the demand side.

<sup>14</sup> Alexa traffic estimates are based on data from a global traffic panel, which is a sample of millions of Internet users using one of many different browser extensions, as well as on traffic data from websites that have installed the Alexa script.

pages of a country or not.<sup>15</sup> With respect to the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the RNS, we operationalize user attention (demand) by the number of followers on Twitter and the number of Facebook subscriptions. Twitter follower data stem from our automatically retrieved collection. Facebook subscriber data were collected manually from the respective accounts on August 2, 2018.

(3) RNS characteristics. To further characterize the right-wing news infrastructures under study, we collected indicators that can be directly observed on the websites by means of a manual content analysis (see online appendix for the standardized codebook).<sup>16</sup> We coded the platforms of content distribution besides the website, form of organization and location, the sources of funding (as discernible on the website) as well as—with respect to content-related characteristics—the amount and type of news categories of the websites. We created three indices in order to classify our RNS. All measures are designed to capture the extent to which RNS appear like a “regular” news site, interpreted as a strategy of “normalization” as opposed to more radical RNS. *Transparency*: In all countries, online news media are either legally required or generally expected to disclose responsibilities for media reporting, not least to be able to issue complaints and assert legal remedies. Thus, we create a transparency index based on whether RNS provide a postal address (+1) and information on editorial staff (+1). A website’s transparency score can range from 0–2. *Advertisement reliance*: Advertisement is still an important form of financing for professional mass media (Cornia *et al.*, 2017). We regard the funding structure, in particular RNS’s reliance on advertisement revenues, as one indicator of their organizational strategy to establish themselves either as independent niche media with alternative sources of funding, or rather to strive for a business model geared towards broad audiences. We rely on the information on sources of income that can be observed directly on the news site, since we are interested in the appearance of RNS to a recipient and the hints given to them to evaluate a site. Advertisement reliance is understood as the reliance on advertisement revenues vis-à-vis other sources of income, namely

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<sup>15</sup> The Alexa country-specific ranking is a measurement of how a website ranks in a particular country relative to other sites over the past month. The rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views. The study by Mukerjee, Majó-Vázquez and González-Bailón (2018) tests the data quality by comparing comScore and Alexa reach rankings and shows that the rank positions of news outlets are very similar in both panels.

<sup>16</sup> All homepages were stored offline between June 21 and July 5, 2018. Coding was done by a team of four coders. Intercoder reliability tests resulted in Holsti coefficients of 1.0 for print, 0.95 for platform usage, 0.90 for platform information, 0.94 for funding, and 0.90 for topic categories (four coders, n = 10 websites).

print revenues, online subscription models, donations, and online shops. The website's advertisement reliance index ranges from -10 (lowest level of dependency: no advertisement and several other forms of financing) to +10 (highest level of dependency: exclusively financed via advertising). For websites with advertisement, the score is calculated as  $1/\text{total number of funding types} \times 10$ . For websites without advertisement, it is  $-1/\text{total number of funding types} \times 10$ .<sup>17</sup>

### *Tendency*

Finally, RNS may also be distinguished based on particular ways to gear and present their content towards a specific audience. Here, we focus on the right-wing tendency displayed by the thematic categories on RNS homepages.

To determine the tendency of homepage categories, we distinguish between conventional news categories (such as Politics, Culture, Opinion, Sports), news categories that address policy fields or use phrases particular to alternative right-wing media (such as Immigration, Freedom of Opinion, Terror, Mainstream Media), and unconventional news categories with no clear right-wing slant (e.g. Animal Rights, Survival).<sup>18</sup> We calculate an index ranging from -10 to +10 indicating to what degree a website's thematic categories can be described as conventional vs right-wing specific. For each category, we assign a value of -10 for right-wing categories, a value of 0 for unconventional but non-partisan categories, and +10 for conventional categories. The more conventional a website's thematic categories, the more an audience strategy of "normalization" may be in place, where RNS refrain from openly flagging their right-wing bias, instead striving to appear like a regular news site.

### **Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Countries**

The 70 media that fulfill our criteria of alternative right-wing online news site distribute somewhat unevenly across the six countries. Table 2 displays the total number of RNS identified for each country, as well as the number of news sites included per million inhabitants. While these numbers must be compared with caution,<sup>19</sup> they provide a first indication of systemic variation in the supply side of

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<sup>17</sup> No source of funding discernible on website = 0.

<sup>18</sup> We define a category as conventional, if it has appeared in at least two out of three leading quality newspapers' online sites in at least one of our countries (see codebook, online appendix). Classification was done by two coders under the condition of unanimous consensus.

<sup>19</sup> As is the case with the legacy media market, many other characteristics may account for the number of media outlets in a given country, such as audience size

right-wing digital news infrastructures.

In absolute figures, the largest number of RNS (36) matching our criteria is found in the US. The perhaps most well-known examples among our list include *Breitbart*, *The Daily Caller*, *The Blaze*, *Townhall*, and *RedState*. In Sweden, 10 online news sites met our criteria, ranging from the neo-Nazi *Nordfront* and the network-based “troll factory” *Granskning Sverige*, to well-established online native news sites such as *Fria Tider*, *Nyheter Idag*, and *Samhällsnyt*. In Germany, we could identify 10 online news sites. Among the best-known are *Junge Freiheit* and *Compact online*, both originally long-standing print offers, as well as *PI News*. In Austria, the selection of eight RNS ranges from the eclectic *Alpenschau* to the more prominent sites *Unzensuriert*, *Contra Magazin*, and *Info Direkt*. In Denmark, only three sites matched our criteria, of which only *Den korte avis* can be regarded as a rather established site. The three British news sites are the pro-Brexit *Westmonster*, the far-right *Heritage and Destiny*, and *Spiked*.

Based on population size, the highest relative number of RNS can be found in Sweden, followed by Austria and Denmark, while the relative count is lowest for the UK. These numbers only correspond to the assumed differences in right-wing digital news supply for the Northern type of media systems. For the Central and Western groups, the number of Austrian outlets is far higher than expected, while numbers are lower than expected for Germany and in particular for the UK.

In the UK, the low number of institutionalized RNS can partly be explained by a national particularity of its overall right-wing news infrastructure. Social media accounts of numerous right-wing activists and pundits on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube successfully serve this spectrum, apparently in lieu of dedicated online news sites (HOPE not hate, 2018). Together with a tabloid press that is extremely inclusive of populist positions (Akkerman, 2011), the market may simply be too saturated for the establishment of new institutionalized online media on the right. A more general explanation is supplied by transnational news audiences. Many Austrian sites cater to a wider German-speaking audience and are in fact predominantly accessed by users from Germany. In the UK, the US-based *Breitbart* is by far the most-visited RNS, outpacing the UK native sites by a wide margin.

Whether or not the right-wing news infrastructure is flourishing in a given country cannot be gleaned only from the number of RNS. For a more complete picture, it is necessary to consider how actively these sites produce and disseminate content—and how actively such content is being sought out by media users.

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or the importance of regional media. In addition, the comparison is based on the assumption of complete identification of all sites fulfilling our selection criteria at the time of our study. While we secured this as best as possible through the steps of our methodical approach, without official registers etc. there is no possibility of final verification.

### *Supply of Content*

As shown in Table 2, the US is not only the country with the largest number of RNS, but also with the most active ones. Both on their websites and on Twitter,<sup>20</sup> US sites are far more active at disseminating news than their counterparts in Europe. Despite the high average number of articles, at the time of analysis we could also observe a number of extremely inactive sites with less than one article published per day on average (*gotnews.com*, *FrontPageMag*, *Disobedient Media* and *The Federalist*), whereas six websites (*Townhall*, *The Daily Caller*, *Breitbart*, *NewsMax*, *Daily Wire* and *WorldNet Daily*) fall into the category of extremely active media with more than 30 articles per day. Turning to the European sites, the level of content supply appears more balanced, both within and across countries. The observed country differences do however correspond rather well with our expectations. On average, RNS in Sweden and Germany are providing more content than their counterparts in Denmark, Austria and—though only with regard to website-based content supply—the UK. Moreover, the Swedish news infrastructure stands out as the most even in terms of content supply, featuring a number of overall rather active news sites, without a clear leader. The news infrastructure appears to be more dispersed in the remaining countries. Some sites are overall very inactive, while a select number of outlets take a clear lead in terms of supplying content both via their website and social media: *24nyt* in Denmark, *Journalistenwatch* in Germany, *Contra Magazin* in Austria, and *Westmonster* in the UK.

### *Audience Demand*

A high level of supplied content is not of course a guarantee that such content also finds an audience. Turning to the demand side, we can observe that the right-wing news infrastructures correspond to the contextual constraints present in our countries, in particular when focusing on the news sites' national page rank. In Sweden, RNS appear to be the most established overall, judged by user demand: of the nine sites for which Alexa data is available, eight—including right-wing extremist *Nordfront*—are among the top 1000 of Swedish websites. Three (*Fria Tider*, *Nyheter Idag*, *Samhällsnyt*) even rank among the top 200. Next in line is Germany, where three out of nine sites are among the top 1000 (two of them, *PI*

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<sup>20</sup> Most of the media studied have both a Facebook page (66 out of 70) and a Twitter account (66 out of 70), while other social media platforms (such as YouTube, VK, Google Plus, Instagram) are used more selectively by individual websites.



*News* and *Journalistenwatch*, even among the top 300) and a total of six among the top 5000. In the US, the majority of news sites does not make it into the top 5000 of websites, but the digital news infrastructure is by no means entirely ultra-niche. The top four (*Breitbart*, *Daily Caller*, *The Western Journal*, *The Daily Wire*) are ranked in the higher end of the top 1000, and *Breitbart* at rank 65 even represents the (nationally) highest ranked website of all RNS investigated here. In Austria, only *Unzensuriert* ranks among the top 1000 websites. Noticeably, however, many of the Austrian sites actually rank substantially higher in Germany than they do in their country of origin, indicating a substantial degree of transnationality of audience demand. In Denmark and the UK, finally, even the better-known RNS (such as *Den korte avis* or *Westmonster*) can be called a niche offer at best. Also in the UK, this is not least a matter of transnationality: UK web traffic for US sites like *Breitbart*<sup>21</sup> and *The Daily Caller* is far higher than for the domestic RNS.

The picture is more blurred for social media demand due to the fact that the demand structures first and foremost appear to be tilted towards English-language offers, as indicated by the high demand for US (overall) and UK sites (when compared to the limited supply structure and website demand). On Twitter, *Breitbart News* (with roughly 950k followers) tops the US and presumably the global right-wing digital news infrastructure; the runner-up *The Blaze* also gathers almost 700k followers and on Facebook it is in fact the *Daily Caller* with around five million followers that takes the lead by a margin. The English-language bias of social media is also underlined by the fact that the Swedish-founded, partly US-based and English-language *RedIce TV* is in highest demand on both Facebook and Twitter in Sweden, despite the fact that the site only offers limited content and is also rather unknown in both countries. For the non-English speaking sites, the average number of Twitter followers is highest in Sweden and Germany, which mirrors both the supply side, as well as the overall context expectations rather well. Average Facebook subscription rates are in turn rather even across all countries, excepting the US.

Table 2. Supply and demand indicators by country

		Sweden	Denmark	Germany	Austria	UK	US
Supply	Number of websites included	10	3	10	8	3	36
	Websites included per 1 million	1	0.5	0.1	0.9	0.05	0.1

<sup>21</sup> From a user perspective, *Breitbart London* is sometimes presented as a UK website (e.g. Newman et al. 2018). As it is organizationally not a free-standing spin-off, it is classified here as part of the US site.

	inhabitants						
	Average number of articles per month – Mediacloud	213	134	220	119	105	690
	Websites with on average less than 1 article/ more than 30 articles per day - Mediacloud	0/0	1/0	3/0	1/0	1/0	4/6
	Average number of tweets per month <sup>1</sup>	222 (9)	163 (2)	321 (7)	139 (6)	372 (3)	975 (35)
<b>Demand</b>	Share of sites among the top 1000/5000 sites - Alexa rank <sup>2</sup>	8/8 (9)	0/2 (2)	3/6 (9)	1/3 (7)	0/0 (2)	4/16 (36)
	Twitter followers - average <sup>1</sup>	9088 (9)	93 (2)	8359 (7)	1321 (6)	24.746 (3)	102.888 (35)
	Facebook subscriptions - average <sup>1</sup>	28.482 (8)	31.134 (3)	33.335 (9)	23.661 (8)	24.466 (2)	858.815 (36)

<sup>1</sup> Twitter and Facebook data are based on websites active in the month of data collection; number of active sites in brackets; <sup>2</sup>Alexa data is not available for all RNS; number of sites included in Alexa in brackets.

### *Classifying RNS Across Countries*

Our analyses so far have shown that the country factors examined can explain part of the variance in the supply and demand structures of right-wing online media. We now turn to further characterizing these sites in their organizational and content-related structures in order to analyze whether national contexts also bring about particular types of RNS or whether different types of RNS emerge across countries. The three indicators used to describe the RNS in our study—namely, transparency, advertisement reliance, and tendency—are measures to differentiate more radical RNS from sites with a more “normalized” news site appearance.

Being transparent about who bears journalistic responsibility can be seen as one aspect of the organizational strategy of RNS. The majority of RNS can be classified as fully transparent (n=37; 53 percent) or partly transparent (n=24; 34

percent), and these sites scatter across all countries (for details, see Appendix Table A1). The number of RNS that qualify as fully non-transparent is small ( $n=9$ ; 13 percent). These RNS appear mostly as outsiders in each country and do not group together with regard to other factors, such as a particular level of advertisement reliance or their supply and demand structure. Although our data show a pronounced in-country heterogeneity with regard to the overall level of transparency, we can also account for some more systematic country variation. Zooming in on the less transparent RNS, we can see that the northern countries and the US tend to be less transparent in terms of location and are thus also less likely to achieve full transparency as defined by our scale (see Appendix Table A2). The level of transparency appears unrelated to both the degree of establishment of the right-wing news infrastructure in a given country, as well as to an individual site's standing within this infrastructure. Moreover, even with a full disclosure of location and editorial staff, a news site might still be concealing or at least not actively highlighting vital pieces of information on their organizational underpinnings. The prime example here is the Swedish *Samtiden*, which discloses its publishing house's organizational form, location and editorial staff, but not that the publishing house is owned by a political party, namely the right-wing populist SD (who presumably also provide some form of funding, given that no other sources of funding could be identified).<sup>22</sup>

The organizational strategy can further be described by RNS's reliance on advertising revenues. The majority of RNS partly depend on advertising revenues (mean 4.3, SD 3.9,  $n=70$ ). This applies to established RNS such as *Breitbart*, *The Daily Caller*, *Nyheter Idag*, as well as far-right magazines such as *Nordfront* and *Heritage and Destiny*, and several niche RNS. In most cases, the funding portfolio consists in advertisement plus one other form of income (for the less established sites often in the form of donations). Only a small minority of RNS, many of which hail from Sweden, are entirely independent of advertising revenues. Finally, around 20 percent of our RNS are exclusively funded through advertisement. None of these outlets is among the leading sites in terms of supply and demand, and with the exception of German *Politikstube*, they are all based in the US.

The in-country heterogeneity does not mean, however, that country differences do not play a role at all. Most prominently, Sweden stands out as a right-wing news infrastructure that is largely advertising-independent (mean  $-0.3$ , SD 4.5,  $n=10$ ). At the other end of the spectrum, we find the US to feature a number of heavily advertising-dependent sites (mean 5.8, SD 3.5,  $n=36$ ), largely discarding

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<sup>22</sup> Also in other countries, individual RNS entertain close relations to right-wing populist parties, e.g. *Unzensuriert* to the Austrian FPÖ and *Freie Welt* to the German AfD, however not in the form of direct ownership.

the funding sources more common to alternative and movement-based media, such as donations and shops.

Regarding RNS's right-wing tendency, the sites scatter heterogeneously across countries, with the German *PI News*, Danish *Den Korte Avis*, Swedish *Nordfront*, and US *Breitbart* openly flagging their right-wing slant from the off, while other RNS across all six countries structure their website content in a more conventional way—the presumably right-wing slant of the articles bundled into these conventional categories notwithstanding (mean 4.1, SD 4.5,  $n=61$ ). However, some country differences are also seen in the right-wing tendency of RNS's topical categories. Swedish and Austrian RNS are on average most conventional in their thematic categories. When looking beyond the prominent exceptions of *PI News* and *Journalistenwatch*, many German RNS also refrain from predominantly gearing their thematic categories to particular right-wing issues such as Islam or immigration. This picture changes substantially for the two countries with the least established online right-wing news infrastructure, namely Denmark and the UK, where right-wing and unconventional categories dominate. In the US, finally, RNS are very diverse with regard to their right-wing tendency.

Overall, our data shows that RNS with a more pronounced right-wing bias in their topical categories are more likely to be non-transparent about their editorial responsibility and location (Pearson's correlation, 0.387,  $p<0.01$ ). On the other hand, RNS with stronger right-wing tendency and low transparency are not necessarily relying on alternative sources of financing.<sup>23</sup> Rather, there is a great diversity of RNS, each of which can be described with its own combination of organizational strategy, content-related tendency, funding structure, and activity pattern. Nevertheless, four patterns describe the more distinct types, in which almost 40 percent of the RNS studied can be classified. Those patterns are again not country specific, but in most cases include sites from different countries (Figure 1).

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<sup>23</sup> Pearson's correlation for tendency and transparency with activity of a site as per articles per month and with reliance on advertising each not significant.

Figure 1. Classifying RNS: extreme cases

		Tendency	
		Low	High
Transparency	High	<b>Right-wing tendency but transparent</b>  <b>Denmark:</b> Den Korte Avis <b>Germany:</b> Journalistenwatch <b>UK:</b> Heritage and Destiny <b>US:</b> Breitbart, Gotnews	<b>Conventional tendency and transparent</b>  <b>Austria:</b> Alles Roger, Wochenblick, Zur Zeit <b>Germany:</b> COMPACT, Freie Welt, Junge Freiheit <b>Sweden:</b> Nyheter Idag, Samtiden <b>US:</b> CNS NEWS, Daily Caller, The Daily Wire, The Political Insider
	Low	<b>Right-wing tendency and non-transparent</b>  <b>Denmark:</b> NewsSpeak Networks <b>Germany:</b> PI-NEWS <b>US:</b> Big League Politics, Information Liberation, Tea Party Tribune	<b>Conventional tendency but non-transparent</b>  <b>Sweden:</b> Svegot

Note: “Extreme” cases for metric variable tendency (−10 to +10) include RNS within the lower 25 percentile (−9.60 to 0.41) = right-wing tendency of categories and RNS within the top 25 percentile (7.93 to 10.00) = conventional tendency. For categorical variable transparency (0 to 2), RNS with 0 (non-transparent) and 2 (high transparency) are included.

The most extreme pattern describes RNS, which show a strong right-wing tendency in their thematic categories, and which are non-transparent regarding editorial responsibility. The German *PI News* is one example of this type, displaying an extreme right-wing slant, while being among the more active German RNS and quite diversified in its funding structure. Danish *NewSpeak Networks*, in contrast, can be described as a niche offer at best, and is partly financed by donations. The second pattern comprises sites with a clear right-wing tendency, which are nevertheless transparent and, in this sense, professional. This pattern includes the small far-right magazine *Heritage and Destiny*, and the equally small *Den Korte Avis*, but also *Breitbart*, which is among the top US websites. *Breitbart*’s approach clearly seems to be geared towards building a global and rather decisive right-wing news brand rather than trying to “normalize” its appearance. The most normalized pattern, however, is the one which includes most of the uniquely classifiable cases. Obviously, many RNS across countries already show a quite normalized appearance, combining a rather conventional structure of website content with (at least ostensible) transparency. Those patterns include many long-standing sites, such as *Wochenblick* and *Junge Freiheit*, with stable supply and

demand structures. If we consider the large group of RNS that cannot be classified into the four core patterns, we see that the biggest group (n=16) is on the verge of normalization, representing sites that combine a moderate right-wing tendency with high transparency. Finally, to give website content a conventional outlook without providing transparency is obviously not a prominent prototype. The only example of this pattern is the Swedish *Svegot*.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Right-wing digital news sites are an important feature of the new landscape of alternative or hyper-partisan media, and therefore also of the mounting challenge of populism and related patterns of polarization in many consolidated democracies. The potential impact of hyper-partisan media on public deliberation, audiences, and, in the long run, democratic culture, is therefore a matter of growing importance. However, research in this area is still relatively sparse. In order to expand this emerging body of research, our study provides a better understanding of right-wing digital news infrastructures and the national conditions under which they emerge.

The scope of this study obviously comes with some limitations. First, we have focused on a strictly defined set of text-based RNS, thus disregarding video-based news channels that are also becoming increasingly important in right-wing news environments. Secondly, our analysis of website content refers to the thematic categories that are used by RNS, but not to the style and tendency of the published articles themselves. Given that the emergence of right-wing alternative news infrastructures speaks directly to the populist challenge in current democracies, further research is needed to assess the degree to which RNS themselves actually adhere to and apply populist rhetoric and style in their articles and posts, and thus also, to what degree their news output has the potential to contribute to a widening gap between the people and the elites, on top of or maybe even opposed to a more traditional form of polarization along the left–right axis. Finally, more research is needed to shed light on the transnational dimensions of the emerging right-wing news ecologies, focusing on transnational audiences, as well as on transnational communicative and organizational ties between RNS.

That said, our study has unearthed systematic variation in the supply of and demand for right-wing news across countries, in particular with regard to the countries pertaining to the ‘Central’ and ‘Northern’ media systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014): As expected, the activity patterns on the websites and the demand by audiences show that the Swedish and German sites are more active and have a more established user base than their Danish and Austrian counterparts. For the ‘Western’ media systems (UK and US), the partly contradicting contextual conditions in the media and political systems have pointed to a more mixed potential for right-wing news in both countries. Supply of and demand for UK-based RNS is generally low,

while the US features an active right-wing news infrastructure that is however dominated by a few particularly active sites.

At the same time, some of the emerging supply and demand patterns only partly correspond to our overall expectations. Most noticeably, supply and demand of right-wing digital news proves to be lower than expected for the UK sites and somewhat higher than expected for the Austrian sites. While UK audiences resort primarily to US-based outlets, the Austrian right-wing news infrastructure is fueled by an extremely large share of German users. Thus, our results show that transnational audiences and shared language areas are a vital component in understanding right-wing news infrastructures on a national level.

Although the organizational and content-related strategies of RNS also show some country-specific particularities, the national right-wing digital news infrastructures display significant similarities in this respect. In all countries, we find a situation where different types of RNS occupy specific hyper-partisan news niches, ranging from RNS with a more “normalized” appearance, to more radical RNS that clearly set themselves apart from the news mainstream in terms of their thematic categories, their funding strategy, and their organizational transparency. In other words, the larger right-wing news environment in each country does not seem to bring about convergence or streamlining of RNS towards one dominant type. Thus, we are in fact dealing with a variation of “alternatives” when referring to alternative media on the political right. We find different patterns of supply and demand, as well as distinct funding structures, organizational strategies, and thematic tendency. This heterogeneity provides an important corrective to simplistic interpretations of hyper-partisan media as mere “fake news media” or “junk media.” That being said, our analysis also provides an indication that many RNS across countries seem to be developing towards normalization in terms of their content-based and organizational strategies. While many of these “normalized” websites are characterized by rather stable supply and demand structures, we can also account for extreme niche sites with a rather conventional appearance, just as we find larger sites that feature clearly partisan thematic categories and/or lack basic editorial transparency. Whether individual RNS appear as normalized rather than radical is thus not directly related to the sizes of their audiences.

The normalization of RNS challenges current digital news environments in that such a strategy makes it increasingly hard for audiences to discern hyper-partisan from regular online news. At the same time, this majority strategy of normalization might add an additional incentive or pressure to the remaining RNS to radicalize even further—in order to not only provide a counterpoint to established media, but also to a normalized right-wing media. Indeed, we might witness an even more explicit division of labor between more normalized and radical RNS, as right-wing digital news infrastructures expand and evolve.

An issue of particular, and more normative, concern in the emerging debate

is whether alternative and hyper-partisan media can be contained not only by increased regulation (such as hate speech laws or social media policies to counter the spread of nationalist content), but also by a political and legacy media system that is more forthcoming to the representation of right-wing actors and positions. Although our analysis is not geared towards normative evaluations, our results show that the marginalization of right-wing views and positions in media and politics will eventually make the establishment of a thriving right-wing digital news infrastructure more likely. Yet, given the substantial transnational user base of some of the investigated RNS, a political and media landscape that is relatively open towards right-wing positions is not an automatic safeguard against a flourishing right-wing news infrastructure. Moreover, it remains a question for future research whether increasing openness towards right-wing positions in legacy media and mainstream politics in countries like Sweden or Germany will eventually result in a regressing supply of and demand for alternative right-wing news, or whether these alternative online news media, once they have successfully positioned themselves, will persist even under changing contextual conditions.

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