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Advancing the study of alternative media structure and content

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*Published in:*  
Journalism Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/1461670X.2020.1814846](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1814846)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Mayerhöffer, E. (2021). How do Danish right-wing alternative media position themselves against the mainstream? Advancing the study of alternative media structure and content. *Journalism Studies*, 22(2), 119-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1814846>

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## **How do Danish right-wing alternative media position themselves against the mainstream? Advancing the study of alternative media structure and content**

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### **Abstract**

The global rise of hyper-partisan media, especially on the political right, has been receiving increasing scholarly attention in the past years. In contrast to discarding these media as mere producers of fake news, this paper studies them as a case of alternative news media and thus as a self-proclaimed corrective to a perceived media mainstream. By focusing on the case of Denmark, where the public debate generally has been described as very open, the paper sheds light on the alternative character of these media in an environment that does not shun radical voices and viewpoints. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the entire website and article content published by five right-wing alternative news media in April 2019, the paper shows that Danish right-wing alternative media resist normalization at the structural level, but appear only moderately antagonistic and anti-hegemonic at the level of article content.

Keywords: alternative media, right-wing media, hyper-partisanship, mainstream media, counter-publics, Denmark, disinformation

### **Background and research question**

The rise of hyper-partisan media, in particular on the political right, has been receiving increasing scholarly attention in the past years. However, the focus so far has been predominantly on the contribution of such media to the dissemination of fake news, online disinformation, hate speech and media populism. Along with recent literature, the article argues for a journalistic perspective that addresses the function and rationality of these sites as a distinct type of news media in modern news environments (Holt 2019; Heft et al. 2020; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2018). Thus understood, online hyper-partisan news sites must first and foremost be understood and analyzed as a particular type of so-called radical or alternative media that seek to challenge “hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing 2001). The article contributes both theoretically and empirically to this agenda through a study of the most important right-wing alternative media in Denmark.

While their contribution to the spread of online mis- and disinformation clearly remains a relevant issue, hyper-partisan online media cannot be reduced to mere transmitters of fake news, but must be treated as

alternative *news* media in their own right, and consequently also as a (boundary) case of journalism (Pinçon 2018; Atton 2003). Approaching the study of hyper-partisan media through the prism of alternative media and journalism in this way means that the ubiquitous issue of fake news and disinformation is subsumed under broader questions about the role and function of this type of media in relation to mainstream media. More specifically, a focus on right-wing online media as a form of alternative news media raises the issue of how the ‘alternativeness’ of such media actually plays out in relation to the perceived media mainstream they proclaim to challenge. Taking the theoretically and analytically important distinction between the structure and content of alternative news media into account, the article thus seeks to answer the following research question:

*RQ: How and to what degree do Danish right-wing online news media establish themselves as alternatives to mainstream media in terms of structure and content?*

Although hyper-partisan alternative news media are by no means confined to the political right, the particular position of right-wing media and their opposition to the perceived (left-liberal) hegemony of mainstream media constitutes a general problematic with increasing relevance for a significant number of national media systems. Hence, we need more knowledge about the role of these media. To what degree is their counter-hegemonic self-understanding reflected in the articles they publish? Do they fundamentally subvert legacy media or do they function rather as a minor corrective to the established system of news production and dissemination? Do we see a new ecosystem of alternative news providers emerging, and if so, does it have the potential to replace existing news media in their role as the main provider of news and views to substantial parts of the population? The article takes up these questions in the ‘least likely’ and perhaps even extreme case of Denmark. It is often assumed that hyper-partisan right-wing media thrive where right-wing actors are ostracized from the (mediated) public debate. However, this is clearly not the case in Denmark, which is defined by a strong culture of ‘open debate’ and contestation, as well as an established right-wing populist party with significant electoral and political success (The Danish People’s Party), and more recently an additional member of this party family elected to parliament (The New Right). This raises the question of how the anti-hegemonic impetus of alternative news media plays out in a context where more extreme right-wing positions have found their way into the “sphere of legitimate controversy” (Hallin 1986). Or, put somewhat bluntly: how do right-wing alternative news media position themselves in a political and media context where you can (almost) say anything anyway?

### **State of the art: from fake news to alternative media**

A growing body of research has addressed the contribution of right-wing online media to the dissemination of online disinformation, hate speech and, in a wider sense, political and societal polarization in conjunction with the mounting populist challenge in recent years. In this context, hyper-partisan media are predominantly seen as carriers of ‘junk’, ‘false’ or ‘fake’ news, i.e. conspiratorial,

verifiably false or even intentionally deceitful news and information (see e.g. OII 2018, Fletcher et al. 2018). Beyond this focus on disinformation, recent contributions have shown that alternative news sites like *Breitbart* serve as central nodes of online news provision and as a bridge between partisan mainstream media and the far-right in the U.S. (Benkler et al. 2018, Kaiser et al. 2020). Other studies take an audience-centered approach, focusing on the motives and engagement patterns of right-wing alternative media users. One study shows that followers of hyper-partisan alternative Facebook pages in Norway are substantially more active in liking, commenting and sharing than followers of traditional online news media, thereby amplifying hyper-partisan news content on Facebook (Larsson, 2019). Other studies have shown that users of right-wing online media are rather heterogeneous, ranging from outright system skeptics with a profound distrust in societal institutions to users that consume right-wing news more sporadically as a supplement to legacy news (Newman & Kalogeropoulos 2018; Noppari 2019).

Only a few studies have focused explicitly on the broader content portfolio of right-wing alternative media beyond individual instances of disinformation. Atkinson and Berg (2012) look at alternative media from a mobilization perspective and argue that right-wing alternative media are far more specific thematically than their left-wing counterparts, leading to what they call “narrowmobilization”, based on a study of the Tea Party Movement in the U.S. Other studies have focused on the coverage of specific events. Wasilewski (2019) shows how right-wing alternative media in the U.S. contribute to the construction of counter-collective memories, specifically with regard to the confederate legacy in connection with the removal of a Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville. Nordheim, Müller and Scheppe (2019) show how the coverage of the refugee crisis by German right-wing media *Junge Freiheit* was mostly reactive, lagging behind the coverage of mainstream news outlets. By contrast, Figenschou and Ihlestad (2018) single out all articles that contain evaluations of legacy media and journalists published by a number of Norwegian right-wing alternative news media. Their analysis shows that right-wing alternative media construct different positions of authority to challenge legacy media, alternating between a position of insider, expert, victim, citizen and activist.

While these studies have generated significant insights into different aspects of hyper-partisan, right-wing media, more sustained attempts to analyze the role and function of such media are rather sparse. However, a decisive step in this direction has been taken in a recent comparative analysis of hyper-partisan, right-wing online media in six Western countries (U.S., U.K., Germany, Austria, Sweden and Denmark) (Heft et al. 2020). Based on a comparison of supply and demand patterns, as well as organizational characteristics of right-wing online news sites, the study shows how right-wing online news infrastructures vary between different national political and media contexts. Of particular relevance here is the attention drawn to the issue of how accommodating established media and politics are towards actors on the radical right. Indeed, the inclusiveness of the media and the political sphere towards radical right-wing positions varies significantly between countries. Consequently, the demand for alternative news, as well as the supply and character of right-wing news can be assumed to depend on the degree to which (far-)right-wing news and views find their way into the political debate and legacy media (Heft et

al. 2020). In order to bring this line of inquiry further, however, we need theoretical tools to understand the relationship between hyper-partisan alternative media and mainstream media within and across different media systems.

### **Right-wing alternative news media: analytical framework**

Alternative media are by no means a new object of study in journalism research (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Harcup, 2012). Drawing inspiration from cultural studies and critical theory, the concept was originally used in studies of ‘progressive’ and counter-hegemonic media, mostly on the left side of the political spectrum (Haller et al. 2019). Thus understood, alternative media represent a “radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media” (Atton, 2005, p. 267), as well as a challenge to institutionalized journalistic norms and practices (e.g. Atton 2009). Even if it was clear from the outset that alternative media and journalism could potentially display “repressive” and even anti-democratic features, the original research focus lay elsewhere (Downing, 2001, Atton, 2006). However, this issue has become increasingly prominent with the global proliferation of a new type of (digitally native) right-wing media in recent years, among which U.S.-based *Breitbart* is the most well-known example. Many of these outlets are self-declared ‘alternative’, which has in turn fueled academic debate about how these “other alternatives” should be understood in relation to earlier research and thinking on alternative media and journalism (Haller et al. 2019).

To this end, Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich propose a relational and “non-ideological umbrella definition” of alternative news media as “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” (2019, p.3, emphasis in original). This definition avoids association with concepts of active citizenship and empowerment, typically invoked by discussions of alternative journalism in a progressive or left-wing context (e.g. Harcup, 2011; Fenton and Barassi 2011). Instead, the counter-hegemonic or complementary position and discourse of alternative media in relation to mainstream media is highlighted as the “organizing principle behind alternative media enterprises”, and thus the common denominator between very different types of alternative news media (Holt et al. 2019, p.3). However, alternative media and mainstream media should not be understood as absolutely opposed categories in the current context of hybrid media systems, but rather as the outer ends of a spectrum within which the relationship between alternative media and mainstream media is subjected to ongoing boundary struggles and empirical variation (Holt et al. 2019, p.6).

The purpose of the proposed definition is thus not merely to ensure strict classification, but rather to enable research on how alternative media position themselves in relation to mainstream media and carry out their counter-hegemonic agenda in different contexts. The ‘alternativeness’ in relation to mainstream media can, building on this definition, be observed at three different levels of analysis. At the micro level, the alternativeness of a news outlet manifests itself in alternative news content, i.e. in “alternative

accounts and interpretations of political and social events”, and in the inclusion of alternative producers of content, such as citizen journalists or activists (Holt et al. 2019). At the meso level, alternativeness refers to the production and dissemination processes, such as unconventional sourcing practices and the use of non-traditional dissemination channels. At the macro level, finally, alternativeness concerns how news media relate to established professional institutions, regulatory systems and media policy. While this framework is an extremely helpful starting point for empirical analysis, it is also in need of further elaboration in some respects.

First and foremost, a *clearer distinction between the structure and content* of alternative media is needed (table 1). While rightly pointing out that the counter-hegemonic enterprise of alternative media can play out differently at the micro, meso and macro level, the proposed framework by Holt et al. does not distinguish systematically between the specific dimensions where alternativeness manifest itself empirically. An important distinction to be made here is whether the distance to mainstream news media (MSM) is observed at the structural level of the news outlet as such, or at the level of article content. Whereas the structural dimension provides insights to how the news outlet positions or ‘brands’ itself in relation to MSM, the content dimension reveals whether such distance is maintained in actual news production. While this issue is hinted at by Holt et al., their framework does not provide the tools to tackle it more systematically. For example, the question of sourcing practices (meso) might look quite different, depending on whether it is being judged on the basis of editorial guidelines (such as the aim to include user-generated content, or a proclaimed by-passing of news wires) or the actual news content (where the news site may fall back on citing MSM or wire content). Indeed, a rather likely scenario in this respect could be that structural alternativeness is not fully maintained in article content. More generally, the distinction between structure and content makes it possible to distinguish more systematically between two aspects of alternativeness: *normalization*, understood as the degree to which alternative news outlets mimic the outward appearance of established news outlets, and *antagonism*, understood as the degree to which alternative news outlets maintain a level of active opposition to MSM in their article content.

Table 1: Analytical framework

	MICRO	MESO	MACRO	Alternativeness
STRUCTURE	Composition of editorial board Topical categories	Distribution channels Funding Editorial guideline	Professional institutions and regulatory systems Press subsidies	Normalization?
CONTENT	Creators/producers Issues and events	Cited sources and hyperlinking practices	Media criticism	Antagonism?

In the *structural* dimension, the overarching question is thus whether alternative news outlets succumb to an (*outward*) *strategy of normalization* or not, irrespective of the nature of the published articles. For example, the news site's homepage can serve as an immediate demarcation from established news sites by creating a visible distinction in terms of layout, topical categories, payment options etc., or it can mimic or imitate more established news sites (Heft et al. 2020). A more far-reaching aspect of normalization is professionalization, both in the organizational dimension (standardization of work practices) as well as in an occupational dimension (journalistic education and training, a shared code of ethics and journalistic (self-)regulation) (Örnebring 2009). In other words: are alternative media staffed by people with a journalistic education and/or experience from established media outlets, and is this fact highlighted or downplayed by the news site? Is the news site concerned with journalistic positions and titles, mimicking a 'real' newspaper? Membership in press councils and other professional bodies constitutes another crucial aspect of normalization<sup>1</sup>.

In the *content* dimension, alternativeness can be understood more specifically as the degree to which alternative media reside in active opposition to the legacy media system. In other words: how *antagonistic* is the position of alternative media in relation to the assumed hegemony of mainstream media? In its most basic form, the position of alternative media is essentially counter-hegemonic and thus highly antagonistic. Whether this radical position bears out in practice or whether alternative media rather seek to complement mainstream media, however, remains an open question. Indeed, the answer to this question is decisive in order to fully grasp the role of alternative media and their potential impact on society – not least with regard to right-wing alternative news media. In this dimension, then, alternativeness can be understood as a matter of how 'anti-system' alternative media are. Right-wing alternative media may indeed lack any explicit anti-system traits, even if they feature agendas that are "deemed provocative or even harmful by some" (Holt 2019, p. 37, Holt 2018).

Even though the degree of antagonism toward mainstream media may have some bearing on the structure of alternative media, it carries particular relevance for their content and its relation to news production in mainstream media. One of the more straightforward expressions of antagonism is the systemic criticism exercised by alternative media. Such criticism will first and foremost comprise criticism of the established media, but also of politics and society in general. Of course, criticism as such does not make a news outlet alternative, let alone anti-system. The decisive question is whether such criticism is actively voiced with the intention to delegitimize the present system and/or mobilize the audience based on strong antagonisms. To give an example: A self-proclaimed right-wing alternative news site that reports on immigrant crime can be assumed to do so in order to counterbalance the perceived lack of interest in (or even active suppression of) such stories in mainstream media. The question is, however, whether such a

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<sup>1</sup> Although some may view the non-membership of professional organizations as a *sine qua non* of alternative news outlets, the reality is more complicated, as evidenced by the fact that the editor of Norwegian right-wing online news site document.no has recently joined the Norwegian Association of Editors (Holt et al. 2019).

news story leads up to an attribution of responsibility, a treatment recommendation or even a call for action that challenges the position and legitimacy of legacy media as a provider of news and views to the general public.

The antagonism of alternative media toward the mainstream media system not only concerns the degree to which overall declarations and frames are anti-system. At the meso level, highly antagonistic alternative media will most likely draw on and hyperlink to other partisan (media and non-media) sources rather than relying on material provided by mainstream media and other established sources, unless such material is used to delegitimize these sources. At the micro level, highly antagonistic alternative media should also be characterized by a rather broad news spectrum, offering users their (alternative) view on main current events. This is not to say that every single news story must contain such elements for the news site to qualify as anti-system. However, alternative media that largely operate without such elements cannot be said to reside in an antagonistic or counter-hegemonic position in relation to the mainstream media. Rather, they appear closer to a complementary function or an institutionalized corrective more or less integrated in the existing media system (see also Petray & Pendergrast 2018).

## **Data and method**

The study is based on an analysis of five Danish right-wing alternative online news sites (*24nyt*, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document.dk*, *Folkets Avis*, *NewSpeek*). The study applies qualitative content analysis to analyze the sites' static website content as well as all articles published by these news sites in the course of one month, April 2019.

Denmark is highly relevant as a least likely case that sheds light on alternative media in a context, where conditions for a thriving right-wing news ecosystem are limited. For one, the Danish public sphere has traditionally been very accepting towards the voicing of extreme positions, and maintaining an 'open debate culture' is highly valued (see e.g. Henriksen 2015). As infamously illustrated by the Muhammad cartoon crisis (Sniderman et al. 2014), freedom of speech is highly prioritized and often considered non-negotiable, but also highly politicized by the political right-wing. Moreover, right-wing populist parties like the Progress Party and later the Danish People's Party have been very successful in pushing issues of immigration and integration onto the political, public and media agenda (Bächler and Hopmann, 2017), forcing established political parties to take a tougher stance on issues related to integration and immigration (Bale et al. 2010)<sup>2</sup>, and producing an immigration debate that has been described as 'harsh'

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<sup>2</sup> Recent examples of (envisaged and executed) anti-immigrant political measures backed by parties in government include the official labeling of neighborhoods characterized by a high share of migrants and recipients of social benefits as "ghettoes", authorizing police to seize cash and valuables from arriving asylum seekers to offset the cost of their maintenance and the re-housing of rejected asylum seekers to an island previously serving as a test laboratory for veterinary diseases (<https://time.com/5504331/denmark-migrants-lindholm-island/>)



(Hovden and Mjelde 2019, Hellström and Hellvik 2004). As a result of both tendencies, the political and public debate in Denmark arguably allows for the voicing of right-wing issues and perspectives that in other contexts, not least in neighboring Sweden, would be perceived to fall within the “sphere of deviance” (Hallin 1986)<sup>3</sup>.

April 2019 represents a month of routine (i.e. non-electoral) coverage, but was also chosen due to a number of events of particular relevance from a right-wing partisan point of view. Internationally, these include the Sri Lanka Easter attacks (which led to Danish casualties), the Brexit postponement, the Notre Dame Cathedral fire in Paris and the general election in Israel. Nationally, significant events include riots in connection with public demonstrations of extreme right-wing politician Rasmus Paludan and his attempts to get his party Hard Line on the ballot for the 2019 Danish general election, a fatal gang-related shooting in the wealthy Copenhagen suburb of Rungsted, a political scandal implicating a member of the left-wing party Unity List in a rape case, and not least the suspension of *24nyt*'s Facebook page on April 10<sup>th</sup> in the wake of a series of articles on *24nyt* published by public service broadcaster *dr.dk*.

The selection of sites was based on three criteria proposed by Heft et al. (2020). I) The site must identify as a news outlet, based on its self-presentation and website layout, and provide current, non-fictional (text-based) content with a certain frequency. While this criterion excludes blogs (such as *Uriasposten.dk* and *Snaphanen.dk*), as well as websites maintained by movements and associations (such as *Trykkefrihedsselskabet.dk*), it does not involve specific journalistic standards, requirements on staff size or output quantity. II) The site should describe itself as an alternative media outlet, although allowing for the fact that some outlets will do this more clearly than others. III) The outlet must have a political right-wing leaning that is either stated directly on the webpage or becomes otherwise manifest in the website's content orientation. Alternative news outlets on the political left (such as *Solidaritet.dk*), as well as those with no discernible political partisanship, such as *POV International*, are therefore not included. Five sites matched these criteria at the time of data collection, as summarized in table 2.

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<sup>3</sup> The special character of the Danish debate culture is also noticed by right-wing news site *document.dk*, which in its mission statement points to the fact that “the debate in Denmark is not just freer, but has also come further compared to its neighboring countries [Norway and Sweden]”.

Table 2: Danish right-wing alternative online news media

News outlet	Founded in	Founder/ Responsible editor	“Mission statement”	Audience demand (April 2019)
24nyt	2017	Jeppe Juhl (until April 2019; founder) André Rossmann (editor-in-chief)	“a party-independent system-critical online newspaper with politically incorrect opinions. Through strong attitudes and perspectives, we contribute to nuancing the media debate, which is closed hermetically in a left-wing, globalist and multicultural echo chamber.”	Website: top 5,000 Danish website, approx. 70% domestic visitors  Facebook: approx. 34,000 followers
Den Korte Avis	2012	Ralf Pittelkow (responsible editor, owner) Karen Jespersen (owner)	On website: “provide contributions in text and images that are socially significant, entertaining, and with a human touch.” On Facebook: “a very different newspaper. Short, clear and direct. Few key news items are selected, analyzed and evaluated in easy-to-read articles. You can call it news with explanation.”	Website: top 2,500 Danish website, approx. 80% domestic visitors  Facebook: approx. 48,000 followers
Document.dk	2000 (Norway), 2016 (Denmark)	Hans Rustad (founder and responsible editor)	“wants to be an organ for the new right...The right increasingly needs to define new standards and norms...In this work one cannot count on the help of the established media. You must have media channels that work for information and clarification... There is a need for a website that comes with the contrarian analysis and says the things that seem obvious to ever more”	Website: top 20,000 Danish website, approx. 95% domestic visitors  Facebook: approx. 10,000 followers
Folkets Avis	2015	Lennart Kiil (founder and publisher)	Folkets Avis is Denmark's first, best and possibly only genuine system-critical media outlet (...) Folkets Avis can provide the counterplay to the established power that the other media outlets have chosen to give up. For they do not bite the hand that feeds them. This is why you also find here a more in-depth and principled critique of the system than you find on any other news site in Denmark.	Website: top 20,000 Danish website, approx. 85% domestic visitors  Facebook: approx. 10,000 followers
NewSpeek	2015	Jeppe Juhl (founder) Responsible editor: ? <sup>4</sup>	Denmark's free and independent media with no hidden agendas. NewSpeek.info is a media outlet to the political right. Our bloggers, partners and hosts are influenced by their personal attitudes and do not hide behind false neutrality and fake objectivity.	Website: not ranked due to low traffic  Facebook: approx. 12,000 followers

Sources: own compilation, based on the corresponding websites and FB pages, and data provided by Alexa.com (website rank and visitors); translations by the author

<sup>4</sup> Jeppe Juhl is the last known responsible editor for NewSpeek, but claims to have left the news site in 2017 (<https://politiken.dk/kultur/medier/art7186228/Jeppe-Juhl-sigtet-for-at-sprede-drabsvideo-fra-Marokko>).

Since the Danish media archive Infomedia only includes data for *Folkets Avis* and *Den Korte Avis*, article hyperlinks have been collected through the MediaCloud media tracking platform, which collects articles based on a site's RSS feed (mediacloud.org). To account for possible irregularities and omissions in the feed, the collected hyperlinks were cross-checked with the Infomedia database, where available, and with the articles posted on the Facebook page of the news site in the same month<sup>5</sup>. Facebook is a crucial dissemination platform for Danish right-wing alternative media, and all sites use it almost exclusively to post links to their website content (Mayerhöffer and Schwartz 2020). Facebook posts were collected through Facebook's API, using DMI's Netvizz application (Rieder 2013). The (few) article links posted on Facebook not included in the MediaCloud collection were added manually. Overall, 601 hyperlinks to articles published on the respective webpages between April 1st and April 30th were collected for the content part of the analysis: 213 articles on *24nyt*, 202 articles on *Document.dk*, 124 articles<sup>6</sup> on *Den Korte Avis* (with a period of no activity over Easter break), 55 articles on *Folkets Avis*, and only 7 articles on *NewSpeek*. Given the low number of *NewSpeek* articles in the reference month, it has not been included in the analysis at the content level. As the site has – after a longer period of inactivity - started to be more active again from May 2019 onwards, and thus still must be perceived a relevant Danish right-wing news site, it has however been included for the structural part of the analysis. In addition to material featured on the news site's webpage (as of April 30<sup>th</sup> 2019), the analysis of the structure dimension relied on further documents, including press clippings and documents provided by the Danish press council, the Danish Ministry of Culture and the Danish Media Association.

The qualitative content analysis is based on a systematic categorization of the entire news output of the included sites in the given reference month, in accordance with the categories specified in table 1. For the content dimension, the article's author, theme, all hyperlinks and source references, as well as all instances of voiced media criticism were coded. Hyperlinks and source references are distinguished according to whether they are used in a supporting or delegitimizing way, and whether they refer to MSM, hyper-partisan sources or other sources. For the structural dimension, the webpage's 'about us' sections, as well as the topical categories and discernible funding sources visible on the front-page were coded (see Heft et al. 2020 for a similar approach). Building on the theoretical framework, the material has thus been collected and analyzed in order to assess both the structural dimension and content dimension of the respective sites on the micro, meso and macro level, and thus to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their alternativeness. In the structural dimension, the analysis determines whether the news sites in question show signs of what has been referred to as a strategy of normalization. In the content dimension, the analysis will focus on the degree of antagonism and anti-systemness ingrained in the actual news reporting of the sites.

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<sup>5</sup> Data for *24nyt* has only been collected through the MediaCloud platform, as the site's Facebook page has been shut down in April 2019. However, a comparison between the articles collected through MC and through Facebook's API in earlier months results in virtually no articles posted on Facebook that are not included in MC.

<sup>6</sup> Articles featured in the site's news ticker relaying the wire feed of news agency Ritzau have been excluded.

## **The structural dimension: far from normal**

### *The macro level: Professional institutions, regulatory systems and press subsidies*

None of the five right-wing alternative media are members of the Danish Media Association, the key media industry organization in Denmark. More importantly, none of the outlets are registered with the Danish press council (*pressenævnet*), a body established under the Ministry of Justice to deal with complaints issued about Danish mass media and thus to guarantee the observation of sound press ethics (Pressenævnet 2019)<sup>7</sup>. As stipulated in the Danish media liability act, membership in the press council is not obligatory for electronic media, but neither can the press council deny membership to any webpage or electronic database or other type of electronic media. The fact that none of the right-wing news sites are registered is thus an active decision on their part. With one exception (*Den Korte Avis* from 2014 to 2016), none of the outlets have received public subsidies, neither in form of a regular production support (*redaktionel produktionsstøtte*), nor from the Innovation Fund (*innovationspuljen*) providing support for the development of new media formats (Danish Ministry of Culture 2019a, 2019b). This fact is highlighted by all five media on their webpages and social media presence as evidence of their alternative and system-critical position. By shunning membership of the press council and press subsidies, the Danish right-wing media also set themselves apart from other Danish alternative media, both with and without a hyper-partisan profile. Most recently, left-wing alternative news site *Solidaritet* has received financial support from the Innovation fund and registered with the press council. The latter is also the case for the alternative news site *POV International*.

### *The meso level: Funding, distribution and editorial guidelines*

The alternativeness of Danish right-wing media is somewhat more blurred when it comes to organizational characteristics. On the one hand, all five news sites fund themselves rather unconventionally compared to the traditional funding sources of established Danish online news sites (press subsidies, advertisement revenues and paywalls). All sites ask their users for active financial support: donation buttons and ‘support us’ categories are an integral part of their web presence (see table 3). Advertisement is clearly a secondary source of income: only two of the five sites rely on it as an active source of income (*24nyt* and *Den korte avis*). Advertorials and sponsored content, in particular in connection with link building, constitute a further source of revenue.

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<sup>7</sup> However, Hans Rustad, Document.dk’s editor, has in its function of editor of document.no in 2018 been accepted into the Norwegian Association of Editors.

Table 3: Structural characteristics of Danish right-wing alternative news media

		24nyt	Den korte avis	Document.dk	Folkets Avis	NewSpeek
MACRO	Press council registration	No	No	No	No	no
	Press subsidies	None, active opposition	2014-2016	None	None, active opposition	None, active opposition
MESO	Funding sources (as discernible on website)	Donations (one-time and regularly), advertisement, advertorials/ sponsored content	Advertisement, donations, advertorials/ sponsored content	Book shop	Paywall (metered and freemium), donations, advertorials/ sponsored content	Donations, advertorials/ sponsored content
	Advertisement reliance score (-10 to +10) (based on Heft et al. 2020)	3.33	3.33	-1	-5	-2.5
	Main distribution channels	Website, <i>Facebook</i>	Website, Facebook	Website, Facebook	Website, Facebook	Website, Facebook
	Editorial guideline	Partisanship, broad thematic range,	Focus on commercial orientation	Partisanship; corrective to MSM	Focus on opinion-driven journalism	None
MICRO	Editorial board: Journalistic background	Yes, partly	Yes, partly	Yes, partly	Yes	?
	Topical categories (static)	Few, partly partisan	Few, partly partisan	Few, heavy on commentary	None; partisan keywords	None; partisan keywords

Content published by the news outlets is, on the other hand, disseminated rather conventionally. All of the news sites are online native, and their website is their primary publishing platform. None of the sites are present on alternative social media platforms (such as Gab). Facebook is de facto the only established social media channel in use, although most sites do have a Twitter account and, in the case of *24nyt*, also a YouTube channel. The dependence on Facebook for dissemination and audience recruitment is illustrated with particularly clarity in the case of *24nyt*, which had its Facebook page shut down in April 2019 due to “inauthentic behavior”. Rather than seeking to delegitimize Facebook and encouraging its users to stop using Facebook altogether, *24nyt* has attempted to find other ways to ensure that its content continues to be present on Facebook. Not only does *24nyt* actively ask its users to share their content on Facebook on their behalf, *24nyt* content continues to be regularly and comprehensively posted by other Facebook sites (most prominently *Dansk Politik* and *Verden Omkring Os*), for which the dissemination of *24nyt* content seems to be the sole purpose. Time will tell whether Facebook’s increased focus on

disabling pages judged as contributors to hate speech and misinformation will force Danish right-wing alternative media to seek alternative ways of content distribution<sup>8</sup>.

Apart from *NewSpeak*, all sites publish editorial guidelines on their websites, albeit in different genres such as a mission statement (*Document.dk*), a journalistic manifesto (*Den Korte Avis*, *24nyt*) or a personalized mission statement of the editor (*Folkets Avis*). Notably, citizens and citizen journalism are completely missing from all the editorial guidelines in the sample. *Den Korte Avis* focuses predominantly on the commercial nature and goal orientation of the website and less on its alternative position, thus setting it apart from the remaining three sites, which all invest substantial effort in presenting themselves as an alternative to the established news media. *Folkets Avis* elaborates the personal stance of the editor on a number of political and societal issues, based on the proposed journalistic credo that “the more openly you stand by your attitudes and the more conscious you are about them, the more you will be able to approach the world factually”. *Document.dk*’s editorial statement, which positions the outlet as the media organ of the “new right”, only states editorial guidelines in terms of broader goals such as “to ask the most obvious questions” and “to lead the [public] discussion towards its logical conclusions” in order to “think the thought to the end: that Denmark must have the right to stay Danish”. *24nyt* describes itself as a clearly partisan (“national conservative”) and alternative news site that seeks to contribute “to a more nuanced societal debate with politically incorrect angles and unorthodox perspectives on objective facts”. The aim is to be “a real online newspaper, which covers a wide range of topics, not just an anti-Islam blog”. Finally, *24nyt* is the only news site under study that specifically highlights the inclusion of unorthodox sources and contributors, namely “national conservative pundits who are denied access to established media”.

#### *The micro level: Editorial board and topical categories*

Danish right-wing alternative media are by no means the products of journalistic outsiders. Although some do not have formal educational credentials in journalism, the founders of all five news sites have a background in legacy journalism, and the group even includes a winner of the prestigious *Cavling* prize (Jeppe Juhl). The career profiles of some of the founders and editors are also characterized by a strong party-political component. Jeppe Juhl announced his candidacy for right-wing party The New Right whilst still being active as editor for *24nyt*. In addition to their long-standing careers as political journalists and commentators, the two editors of *Den Korte Avis* have served, respectively, as political adviser (Pittelkow) and MP/minister for both center-left and center-right parties (Jespersen). None of the sites are particularly transparent about their affiliated contributors and journalistic experience is neither highlighted nor downplayed. It remains clear, however, that none of the sites mimics a traditional editorial structure, not least due to the fact that all news sites are very small in size: the group of

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<sup>8</sup> By May 2020, the Facebook page of *24nyt* remained permanently suspended, while *document.dk*’s page has been unavailable since what had originally been termed a temporary suspension of the page in July 2019.

contributors is limited to the founders, editors and a number of more or less loosely associated guest contributors and commentators.

The websites themselves also contain a number of elements that shed light on the alternativeness of these media, in particular with respect to the different topical categories used. The use of topical categories to establish the profile of the outlet must be understood as an active decision that is largely independent from the actual article content (Heft et al. 2020). As such, a news site may choose to place a partisan news story about immigrant crime under a traditional category like “Domestic News”, as well as under partisan categories such as “Immigration” or “Multiculturalism”. Generally, the Danish right-wing news sites feature comparatively few topical categories. *NewSpeek* and *Folkets Avis* do not feature any permanent topical categories on their site, but categorize individual articles with regard to specific, often highly partisan, keywords such as “Nepotism”, “Media criticism” or “Islamization”. *Document.dk* does not use right-wing partisan categories, but classifies its news content in a general news section and several commentary-based sections. *24nyt* and *Den Korte Avis*, finally, feature partisan categories such as “Crime” and “Immigration” among the very few specified news categories. Thus, Danish right-wing media do not strive to evoke the image of a classic, traditional news site in their page set up, in contrast to right-wing media in several other countries (Heft et al. 2020). Rather, the topical categories immediately signal an unconventional, opinion-based and partisan thematic tendency of the news sites.

In sum, Danish right-wing alternative media clearly seek to position themselves as journalistic outsiders – despite or maybe even because of the fact that their editors have considerable experience in legacy journalism. By shunning membership of key journalistic organizations and public subsidies, relying primarily on donations from a small but dedicated group of followers instead, they clearly refrain from a strategy of normalization. This conclusion is further reinforced by the openly partisan tendency displayed in editorial guidelines and topical categories. Despite different thematic profiles, this description applies to all five websites, although *Den Korte Avis* and to some degree *Document.dk* appear relatively less oppositional. Noticeably, all news sites still rely on established channels of dissemination, in particular on Facebook.

### **The content dimension: counter-hegemony or minor corrective?**

#### *The micro level: Content producers and topical range*

Who produces the content published on Danish right-wing online news sites over the course of one month? Judged by the byline, articles are being produced by two to four regular contributors, who, in contrast to founders and editors-in-chief, are by and large neither trained journalists nor experienced media columnists. However, they are not exactly ordinary citizens either. For example, *Document.dk*'s content has predominantly been produced by two contributors during the period of analysis: Uwe Max

Jensen, a controversial Danish performance artist and public figure, who announced his candidacy for extreme right-wing party Hard Line in the same month, and Kim Møller, founder of right-wing blog *Uriasposten*. Next to the editors-in-chief, much of *Den Korte Avis*'s content is produced by Poul Erik Andersen, a former priest and member of the Islam Critical Network in the Church of Denmark (Digens 2014). Additionally, all sites feature occasional guest contributions by rather well-known right-wing pundits, as well as politicians from the Danish People's Party (on *24nyt*, *Den Korte Avis*, *Document.dk*) and The New Right (*Folkets Avis*). Many of these guest contributors regularly appear in the debate sections of legacy newspapers, and are in this sense not excluded from the mainstream public debate.

The news output and range of topics covered vary substantially between sites. The news output of *Folkets Avis* is more or less limited to one overarching story in April 2019: a critical investigation of the Danish Association of Lawyers and Economists (Djøj), a Danish trade union with white-collar public service workers. The story is covered in a series of interrelated articles, supplemented by personal attacks on left-wing politicians, most of them female. Although running more stories, *Den Korte Avis* has a rather limited topical range focused on minor crime cases by foreign and migrant delinquents, based on daily police reports. Key events deemed of partisan value (e.g. the Sri Lanka attacks) are taken up, but rarely in more than one article. By contrast, articles published on *Document.dk* often go beyond routine crime coverage and focus on key events, ranging from the Sri Lanka attacks and the Notre Dame fire to public unrest in the Copenhagen neighborhood of Nørrebro in the wake of speeches by Hard Line leader Rasmus Paludan. These stories are supplemented by more magazine-like articles on art, religion and culture. At first sight, *24nyt* features the broadest topical range, corresponding to its mission of going beyond coverage of Islam and migration. In reality, however, a significant portion of the content consists in unedited press releases of various organizations and short introductory texts to articles and columns published in the more conservative Danish MSM and international hyper-partisan media such as *Breitbart* and *Fox News*. Key events such as Brexit are largely addressed through these article links. In fact, *24nyt* resembles a partisan press clipping service more than an actual news site, at least in April 2019.

#### *The meso level: Sources and hyperlinking practices*

An important dimension of alternativeness can be seen in news sites' sourcing and hyperlinking practice. This concerns the question of whether alternative news media rely on MSM and other established societal institutions to provide source material and, if so, whether the reference involves a conformation of claims (supportive link) or a critique (delegitimizing link). These practices vary substantially between news sites. *Den Korte Avis* uses established sources rather extensively and many articles include supportive links to content published in national and international MSM, in addition to a wire feed from Danish news agency Ritzau. *24nyt* draws extensively on public information provided by the police and the national court system. It refers to national and international MSM in a largely supportive way, but also frequently refers to alternative news outlet *Breitbart* in its international reporting. Noticeably, *24nyt*



largely refrains from directly hyperlinking to mainstream sources, in contrast to their consistent hyperlinking to alternative news sources. The sourcing practice for *Document.dk* appears somewhat more diverse. *Document.dk*'s articles feature both supportive and delegitimizing links to MSM, as well as links to other international hyper-partisan media and national right-wing blogs. Finally, *Folkets Avis* is the only Danish alternative news site that largely bypasses MSM, as it predominantly relies on publicly available information from various institutions and actors in its attempt to delegitimize the public sector.

#### *The macro level: Media criticism in article content*

With the exception of *Folkets Avis*, media criticism is found in all of the analyzed outlets. During the period of analysis, an attack on so-called junk news media was launched more or less simultaneously by major Danish MSM such as *Politiken*, *Berlingske* and public service broadcaster *DR*. The attack targeted several of the right-wing online news sites included in this study and indirectly contributed to the suspension of *24nyt*'s Facebook page. Correspondingly, much of the media criticism exercised by the right-wing alternative news sites in the period follows a pattern of self-defense in the wake of increasing MSM scrutiny, leading to stories such as “*DR with Fake News-story – mixes opinions with journalism*” (*24nyt*, 14/04/19). Beyond this line of self-defense, however, media critical articles are relatively sparse. The most prominent exponent of media criticism is *Document.dk* and its Norwegian editor-in-chief Hans Rustad, supported by a number of guest columnists. The latter are also the key contributors to the more limited occurrences of media criticism in the remaining outlets. Articles containing explicit media criticism, however, rarely contain broader systemic analysis, specific attributions of responsibility or calls for action. Media critical articles typically address MSM's alleged pro-Islam bias and their exclusion or ‘censorship’ of right-wing actors, but rarely suggest potential responses or possible actions by citizens, alternative news media or the political right-wing.

Despite the substantial heterogeneity of the news sites at the level of article content, neither can be described as inherently antagonistic or anti-system. While *Den Korte Avis* does connect its routine crime stories with a broader narrative of systemic problems and attribution of responsibility to politicians and legacy media, the limited topical range and highly MSM-oriented sourcing practice of the site makes it a supplement to the existing environment of legacy news. More often than not, the MSM articles used as evidence for immigrant crime even refer to the ethnicity of the offenders themselves, defeating the implicit media criticism that MSM are trying to hide such information from the general public. *Folkets Avis* presents itself as system-critical and its investigative profile largely precludes the use of established media sources. Yet, it lacks news articles that go beyond a very narrowly defined focus on public sector scrutiny, which also means that media criticism beyond public broadcaster *DR* is largely absent. Only *Document.dk* presents itself as a news site committed to a more profound media criticism that can potentially be described as anti-system. However, this position is derived more or less directly from the Norwegian ‘parent’ outlet, established alternative news site *Document.no*. In its current state, the political culture and debate climate in Denmark do thus not seem to provide the soil for home-grown anti-system

news coverage, let alone the establishment of a right-wing alternative news ecosystem set to replace legacy news infrastructures.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides the first comprehensive analysis of the relation between structural and content characteristics of right-wing online news media, based on the case of Denmark. Even though the five analyzed news sites all have a distinct thematic and user profile, and each cover a specific niche in the emerging Danish right-wing news environment, the analysis shows that all news sites position themselves much in the same way in relation to the legacy media system. At the structural level, Danish right-wing alternative news sites display little evidence of normalization, in contrast to some of their counterparts abroad (see e.g. Heft et al. 2020). Rather than mimicking legacy news outlets, all of the sites included in the study present themselves as being distinct from and in opposition to established MSM. This oppositional ambition, however, does not translate to the content of the published articles. Here, Danish right-wing alternative news outlets mainly function as a supplement to the existing legacy news infrastructure and display limited capacity and/or ambition to challenge legacy media as news providers to the larger public. Operating alongside a legacy media environment that is rather forthcoming towards right-wing actors and positions, Danish right-wing alternative media are thus far more radical in presenting themselves as an alternative and challenge to the established media landscape than they can sustain in article content.

More generally, the study has taken a first step toward a better understanding of the complex relationship between the different elements that account for the alternativeness of alternative news media. If the focus of study remains solely on self-curated profiles and/or narrow selections of extreme and more or less willfully misleading articles, the anti-system character of hyper-partisan alternative media is easily overstated. Conversely, a one-sided focus on the structural characteristics of alternative news media may fail to account for the presence of an antagonistic and anti-system agenda in article content. In order to avoid both of these pitfalls, it is important to combine a structural view with comprehensive samples of routine content when studying the alleged anti-hegemonic and alternative position of hyper-partisan news outlets. In other words, future studies should not only focus on alternativeness as a matter of graduation, but also pay attention to systematic discrepancies between structure and content.

Future research will also have to shed further light on the contextual conditions that shape the relationship between the structural and content dimension of alternative news media. In particular: Are non-normalized, non-antagonistic alternative news media indeed particular to a political and media context similar to the Danish case, in which more extreme partisan positions are rather ‘mainstream’? Are there, conversely, more normalized, but antagonistic outlets to be found in contexts, where far-right actors and positions are ostracized in the political and media mainstream? Will we see more internal variation between outlets in countries with a larger hyper-partisan alternative news ecosystem as individual

alternative news media begin to cover particular niches of alternative news making? Whether a conscious decision on part of the news outlet or not, the relationship between structural alternativeness and content will have repercussions for the role and function of alternative news media in the larger environment of political information.

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