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## Why National Media Systems Matter: A Longitudinal Analysis of How UK Left-Wing and Right-Wing Alternative Media Critique Mainstream Media (2015–2018)

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, the growth of new alternative media has brought greater editorial choice and diversity to political coverage in many advanced democracies. But their coverage of mainstream media and portrayal of professional journalism has been subject to little academic attention. This study examined the role alternative political media play in advancing public debate about the value and editorial standards of a national media system. Drawing on a longitudinal content analysis of UK alternative media between 2015 and 2018 ( $N=3452$ ), we found that mainstream media was often criticised—particularly in left-wing sites—and that disapproval of professional journalism intensified over time, most strikingly during the 2017 general election campaign. We also discovered that BBC news was often singled out for its political reporting, with criticism directed at its perceived bias and lack of impartiality. Overall, we argue it is the dominant characteristics of mainstream media in national media systems that help shape the editorial agenda of alternative media and the nature of criticism directed at professional journalism. We conclude that more comparative research is needed about how alternative media represent professional journalism, and whether they are influencing people's understanding of politics and public affairs.

### KEYWORDS

Alternative media; mainstream media; content analysis; media system; public service broadcasting; impartiality; partisan media; editorial standards

As the media have diversified over recent years, there has been a growth of new alternative online and social media platforms challenging the long-held hegemony of traditional mainstream media. With this greater choice and market competition, there is evidence of rising public disaffection with mainstream media in many advanced Western democracies (Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020; Strömbäck et al. 2020). In the US, for example, confidence in the news fell dramatically from over two thirds of people in 1968 to just under a third of people in 2016 (Jones 2018). Even over the last five years, a study of 27 countries found that trust in newspapers, magazines, radio and television, online and other platforms broadly fell by a third (Ipsos Mori 2019).

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Of course, there are major differences in levels of media trust across countries and between media systems (Strömbäck et al. 2020). In the US, for instance, trust in media appears to be ideologically driven. Republicans have long been more sceptical of the mainstream media than Democrats (Brenan 2020). In a comparative study of European countries, it was the UK—above Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden—that recorded the highest level of public mistrust in journalism (Mitchell et al. 2018). This mistrust may have informed how the UK public interpreted traditional news media practices and the political balance of coverage. For instance, fewer than half of people surveyed in the UK—48%—thought the media were “getting the facts right”, with just over half believing journalists investigated the actions of the government, while 37% thought there was generally politically neutral news coverage (Mitchell et al. 2018).

Needless to say, these survey responses paint a broad picture about the public’s relationship with mainstream media. In doing so, they do not entirely capture the complex ways people understand news and journalism cross-nationally, and between media platforms. But while acknowledging the conceptual and empirical challenges of measuring engagement with, knowledge about, and attitudes towards mainstream journalism, Strömbäck et al’s (2020, 151) review of the scholarly literature about media trust emphatically concluded: “it is abundantly clear that many people do not trust traditional news media”. They connected this with the rise of “so-called non-mainstream and partisan media that compete with traditional news media. Such non-mainstream media in many cases even actively engage in attempts to undermine trust in traditional news media” (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 151).

Our interest in this study is *understanding more specifically if such non-mainstream media and partisan media have, over time, undermined mainstream media. And, if so, how have alternative media from both a left-wing and right-wing perspective attempted to undermine public perceptions of and legitimacy towards traditional news practices?* We draw on the largest content analysis study to date of right-wing and left-wing alternative media in the UK ( $N = 3452$ ), which have grown in size and influence since 2015. In particular, during the 2017 election campaign in the UK, alternative media were viewed as being as influential as many legacy news organisations (Cushion 2021a; McDowell-Naylor 2019). Our longitudinal analysis of alternative media between 2015 and 2018 compared content between right-wing and left-wing sites and assessed the extent of coverage about mainstream media. This included examining the nature of any critiques of mainstream journalism in order to assess whether right-wing or left-wing sites have attempted to undermine trust in traditional news media, and, if so, to explore why they have focused on particular news outlets. We chose the UK as a case study because it ranks as one of the least trusted media environments in the Western world. It also has a hybrid national media system, with an influential right-wing partisan press and broadcast media ecology that is legally required to be impartial (Cushion 2015). This includes a number of public service broadcasters that attract large audiences, especially the BBC, which has licence conditions requiring them to be accurate in coverage of politics and public affairs. In comparison with many other countries, the UK’s media system has a strong public service broadcasting presence, as well as highly partisan newspapers that continue to help set the political agenda in a digital environment. This creates an environment where the impartiality of broadcasters is often debated in the press and among the political classes (Cushion et al. 2018).

Overall, this study explores the role new alternative media play in shaping public debate about the value and editorial standards of national media systems. Above all, we found that the agenda of alternative media—especially from new alternative left-wing sites—routinely attacked mainstream media, with the BBC singled out for the most hostile criticism mainly directed at its perceived bias and lack of impartiality. By way of conclusion, we consider the wider implications about the impact of alternative media in media systems, in particular the public's trust in and perception of mainstream media and professional journalism.

## Interpreting Alternative Media and Hyperpartisan News

There is a long-standing body of scholarship examining alternative media from a variety of perspectives (Atton 2002; Downing 2001). This literature has grown stronger in the digital age as academics focus their attention on how online and social media platforms open up new ways of creating alternative media (Fuchs 2010; Forde 2011). In doing so, debates about how alternative media should be theorised and empirically interpreted have intensified in the context of a fast-changing media ecology. What counts as being “alternative” media is the subject of fierce debate and embraces discussions about contrasting ways of producing content that is considered to be distinctive from mainstream media, such as their ownership structures or editorial agenda. In doing so, scholars have conceptualised alternative media as a relational concept; a category that is fluid and conditional on the practise of mainstream media (Curran and Couldry 2003).

Of course, defining what constitutes “mainstream media” is itself contested and open to debate. In contemporary popular discourse, mainstream media have become broadly known by the acronym “MSM”. As audience studies have shown, the lines between what the public view as “alternative media” or “mainstream media” are often blurred and interchangeable (Rauch 2019). In our study, the definition of alternative media is sites that consider themselves either in opposition to the mainstream media or as anti-establishment. An alternative right-wing site, *Westmonster*, for example, considers itself “Pro-Brexit, pro-Farage, pro-Trump. Anti-establishment, anti-open borders, anti-corporatism” (cited in Ponsford 2017). Meanwhile, *Evolve Politics* claimed the rise of new left-wing alternative media in the UK—including itself—was a direct result of mainstream media. Its website argues “a failure of the mainstream media to cater for their audience has resulted in a massive rise in popularity for new left media outlets such as *The Canary*, *Novara Media*, *The Skwawkbox*, and, of course, ourselves, *Evolve Politics*”. In short, *our sample was determined by how alternative media distinguished themselves as editorially distinctive from UK mainstream media*.

This distinction is important to acknowledge because of the hybrid format of new online sites and social media platforms that may be broadly understood as alternative media. Digital native media, such as the *Huffington Post*, have been identified as alternative media by audiences (Rauch 2014), but their many sites across the world would not necessarily describe themselves as being in opposition to mainstream media in the same way as more partisan alternative media sites. In appreciating just how much media ecologies have digitally evolved and diversified over recent years, Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2020, 860) developed a new set of dimensions that help conceptualise what is meant by alternative media. In their words:

Alternative news media position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media, as expressed in editorial agendas or statements and/or are perceived as such by their audiences or third-parties. This counter-hegemonic alternativeness can emerge on the macro-level of societal function, the meso-level of organisations and/or the micro-level of news content and producers.

This represents a more inclusive definition of alternative media when compared to previous definitions. It recognises the fluidity of contemporary media styles formats and acknowledges the changing dynamics of new alternative platforms and boundaries that represent something distinctive from the “mainstream”.

But a more inclusive conceptualisation of alternative media has been resisted because of the particular characteristics of new left-wing and right-wing alternative media—including sites such as *The Canary* and *Breitbart*—that champion a highly partisan agenda and vehemently oppose mainstream media (Rae 2020). Their rise has been connected with the more populist political environment of recent years (Fenton 2018), which, in turn, has created a new media environment that privileges a hyperpartisan reporting style and form. According to Rae (2020), hyperpartisan news represents

a personalisation (bias towards a political leader); bad manners, emotionalisation and simplification (transgressive style); polarisation (shuns objectivity and facts to be overtly partisan), intensification (the elevation of partisan journalism to a ‘hyper’ extreme) and anti-establishment (openly hostile towards mainstream media and political parties while appealing directly to the ‘people’ as content consumers and distributors through social media).

Rae (2020) called for more research and greater empirical clarity about the news practices and content of new alternative media in order to understand the impact they have on the wider political and media environment.

This article develops a longitudinal study about both right-wing and left-wing alternative media in the UK and assesses their hyperpartisan characteristics in respect of the *degree of their hostility towards mainstream media*. In doing so, we consider their portrayal of media systems more broadly, and how they might inform public debate about contemporary journalism. Before we introduce our study, we explore the few limited studies that have empirically examined how alternative or partisan media critique mainstream media, and explain how we build on and develop new lines of conceptual and empirical inquiry.

## **Towards Greater Understanding of How (Right-wing and Left-wing) Alternative Media Critique Mainstream Media**

To date, much of the empirical focus about how alternative media report mainstream media has been qualitative in scope and centred on how new alt-right media portray professional journalism (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Holt 2019; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Based on interviews with editors of right-wing alternative media in Sweden about their attitudes towards mainstream media, Holt (2019), for example, identified a high level of suspicion towards the values and judgements of professional journalists. This was not a result of structural constraints in journalism—he argued—but a belief they deliberately skew coverage in order to promote a particular view of society. From this top-down perspective, a clear editorial motivation to produce alternative media is to correct the ideological imbalance of traditional news reporting.

Figenschou and Ihlebæk's (2019) study of far-right alternative online media developed a comprehensive content-based analysis of how mainstream media were critiqued. Drawing on a sample of 600 articles, five editorial practices of far-right media were identified. First, alternative media sites selected specific stories and used them to highlight a broader pattern of bias. Second, they sought to analyse stories in more detail and depth than mainstream media, with experts used as sources to challenge professional journalists. Third, alternative media sites sought to portray themselves as victims, referencing how they were badly treated by mainstream media journalists. Fourth, ordinary people were used to represent "common sense", in contrast to elites. Fifth, alternative media articles often reviewed the evidence informing mainstream coverage—by accessing, for instance, full transcripts of interviews—and then using it to unmask their selective ideological biases. Overall, they argued that "to capture the complexities of far-right media criticism (as well as other forms of contemporary interest-based, non-elite critique), it is useful to identify the multiple communications strategies deployed to gain authority as a media critic" (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019, 1236).

Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) applied Figenschou and Ihlebæk's (2019) analytical framework to how the US alternative right-wing media site, *Breitbart*, conveyed journalistic authority and legitimacy in their attacks on mainstream media. Drawing on 213 articles in the media section of the site, they identified three main strategies. The first was to announce right-wing political "victories" for either *Breitbart* or the US Republican president, Donald Trump. This was broadly achieved by arguing mainstream media represented corporate or political interests, whereas *Breitbart* addressed the public's agenda and adopted a journalistic watchdog role. To highlight the inadequacies of mainstream media, Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) found stories that prominently undermined professional news practices, such as drawing attention to corrections about their journalism. They also showcased the site's victories by reporting political triumphs, such as Trump appointing a right-wing supreme court judge despite objections from liberal media. Second, the study found *Breitbart* laid claim to being a victim of mainstream media, and the politics and culture it represented. This materialised in stories about traditional conservative or patriotic values being challenged or undermined. According to Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen (2020), this meant *Breitbart* presented "the site as an authoritative watchdog documenting wrongdoing against members of the conservative community". Third, and finally, the most prominent strategy *Breitbart* used was the vilification of professional journalism and mainstream media. This resulted in targeting specific journalists or outlets, labelling them suppliers of "fake news" (echoing Trump) and undermining their journalistic authority.

Taken together, the body of scholarship exploring how alternative media have criticised mainstream media has largely focused on far-right sites. But since alternative media tend to be theorised in relation to the "mainstream", their editorial strategies and degree of ideological opposition to traditional media may be distinctive from less far-right sites or left-wing alternative media. Put simply, there is a need to compare and contrast the content of left-wing and right-wing sites, and to understand the editorial character of alternative media sites across the political spectrum. Nygaard (2019), for example, examined 90 immigration articles in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian right-wing alternative media sites, and discovered their coverage was moderated by national

ideological parameters of mainstream political and media debates. The findings, according to Nygaard (2019, 1160), were

coherent with differences in immigration policy and public discourses within the mainstream news press between the Scandinavian countries. The alternative media outlets seem to a certain extent to adapt to the prevailing political consensus and mainstream media discourses in which they coexist.

In other words, national political and media systems shaped alternative media content.

Our study builds upon this small but growing body of scholarship in four distinctive ways. Since the focus in this area has been largely qualitative in scope, our study provided: (1) a systematic, quantitative picture about the degree of alternative media coverage of mainstream media and the strategies used to undermine traditional journalism. It goes beyond the empirical focus on alt-right media in order to explore whether (2) either right-wing or left-wing alternative media sites were more inclined to criticise coverage of mainstream media and identify any divergent editorial strategies. It also assessed (3) whether the editorial focus on mainstream media changed over time in different left-wing and right-wing alternative media sites. More broadly, our study interpreted (4) the role played by national media systems in policing the boundaries of criticism towards mainstream media. Given the UK's hybrid national media system, with a dominant right-wing partisan press but an influential impartial broadcasting ecology, overall we consider whether this media environment shaped the nature and volume of criticism towards mainstream media, and the targeting of particular types of journalists and news outlets.

## Method

The study drew on a content analysis of both left-wing and right-wing alternative media sites between 2015 and 2018. For left-wing sites, this included *The Canary*, *The Skwawkbox*, *Evolve Politics*, *Another Angry Voice* and *Novara Media*, and for right-wing sites, *Guido Fawkes*, *Breitbart London*, *Westmonster* and *The Conservative Woman*. Our sample was chosen on the basis of identifying the most influential alternative online political media sites in the UK. Our criteria for interpreting "influence" was informed by consulting studies that examined how widely their online stories were shared across different social media platforms (McAlister 2017). We excluded media such as the *Huffington Post* and *Indy 500*, which are tied to traditional media ownership structures and have also excluded sites that are affiliated to a political party, such as *Labour List* or *Conservative Home*. As previously outlined, the criteria for our sample was independently funded alternative media, although how this is achieved varied between sites (from raising funds via users of the sites to billionaire supporters, such as Aaron Banks and his financial backing for *Westmonster*). The broad aim of this study was to identify how both left-wing and right-wing alternative media reported mainstream media over time. Since some of the left-wing sites, which have gained most prominence in the UK, were launched post 2015, our study assessed whether their editorial focus and nature of coverage had changed.

Overall, the study examined 3452 items, and quantified the degree and nature of critique towards mainstream media. We examined three-week sample periods each year

between 2015 and 2018 (6–25 October 2015; 9–29 October 2016; 30 April–7 June 2017; and 8–28 October 2018.). We included analysing the general election campaign over a six week period (rather than three weeks) because it reflected an important period in the UK's democracy, and represented a moment in time when alternative left-wing media were considered to be especially influential (Waterson 2017).

The content analysis began by assessing the degree to which mainstream media was part of routine coverage over four years ( $N = 3452$ ). This provided us with a subsample of 665 articles, which we examined in more depth and detail. The unit of analysis was every mention of a news media organisation (including different references to outlets within an article). At times, references to mainstream media were brief or in passing, but we only coded them when they were explicitly mentioned. Similar references to mainstream media within a sentence were included as a single mention. Where two or more references to mainstream media were identical or extremely similar, we collated them together, so they made up a single referential unit of analysis.

The content analysis began by assessing how many of the 3452 articles in the original sample contained instances of media critique, which we defined as evaluative statements about the media. This created a subsample, which after validation checks, yielded 665 articles which form the focus of the analysis in this study. The unit of observation was what we defined as a "mention". These were sentence levels instances of media critique that conformed to our coding variables. For example, a phrase which reads "The Sun is a biased against Labour". Repeated mentions or mentions that were semantically identical were collated into a unit of analysis, which we defined as a "reference". References often contained one mention, but in some cases contained up to five or six if a particular phrase was repeated. We used references as the unit of analysis to avoid artificially inflating our coding results.

The analysis focuses on the operationalisation of four key variables, which are as follows:

- (1) The media entity. This identified whether the reference was to: an individual journalist and/or their article; individual editor; a publication/outlet, including any programming or features; leadership and/or ownership; a general reference to the mainstream media; or a general reference to alternative media.
- (2) The organisation. This identified whether the reference was to a particular outlet, such as BBC, The Guardian, Daily Mail and so on.
- (3) Sentiment. This identified whether the reference was offering: overt criticism (e.g., "The BBC is biased"); implied criticism (e.g., "a BBC guest is revealed as a Labour activist"); overt praise (e.g., "great reporting from the BBC"); implied praise ("reporting from ITV has revealed the truth about this issue").
- (4) Finally, criticism or praise type. This identified whether the reference was about: factual accuracy (e.g., "The BBC's facts are all wrong"); impartiality or bias (e.g., "The BBC is helping the Conservatives"); Quality (e.g., "The BBC's reporting is terrible"); coverage (e.g., "the BBC is not covering this important issue"); culture and regulations (e.g., "The BBC staff are paid too much"), or other.

The intercoder reliability test examined approximately 10% of the sample and was carried out by two coders. Overall, we found all variables had a high degree of agreement

and, according to Cohen's Kappa (CK), a high statistical degree of reliability. For variable 1, there was no disagreements. For variable 2, the score was 0.94 (CK). For variable 3, the score was 0.72 (CK). For variable 4, the score was 0.87 (CK).

The study had three main research questions:

What was the extent and nature of alternative media criticism towards mainstream media?

Were there any differences between how left-wing and right-wing alternative media criticised mainstream media?

Did coverage of mainstream media in alternative media change in volume between 2015 and 2018, and if so how did the nature of content change?

### ***The (changing) editorial focus of alternative media critiques of mainstream media between 2015 and 2018***

Of the 3452 alternative media items we examined over a four-year period, 665—19.3%—included content that substantively referred to mainstream media. In 2015, 16.6% of items included an item that critiqued mainstream media—either positively or negatively—rising to 19.0% in 2016 and 22.7% in 2017, before falling to 12.3% in 2018. When we break down the differences in how often left-wing and right-wing sites featured a critique of mainstream media, [Table 1](#) shows that in 2015 they were broadly the same. Since then left-wing sites have granted far more editorial emphasis on critiquing professional journalism.

So, while in 2015, all alternative media sites roughly critiqued mainstream journalism to the same proportion, on left-wing sites over time this rose to approximately 3–4 times more between 2016 and 2017. This focus fell to 21.9% of all articles in 2018, but it still represented a higher proportion of coverage than in 2015. For right-wing sites, coverage of mainstream media reduced from 2015 to 2018. But, on closer inspection, left-wing and right-wing alternative media sites were not uniform in their editorial focus on professional journalism. We found striking differences in the degree of attention paid towards mainstream media between sites and over time (see [Tables 2](#) and [3](#)).

Overall, coverage of mainstream media was far higher on left-wing rather than right-wing alternative media sites. *Another Angry Voice* stood out as the most editorially focused about traditional journalism, with nearly half of its articles (45.6%) featuring a critique. Typical headlines of these articles included: “Are the Daily Mail deliberately ridiculing their own readers?” (20/10/16), “Don’t let the mainstream media con you into believing the Tories aren’t ideological extremists” (28/5/17) and “Why do the mainstream press let the Tories get away with systematically abusing disabled people?” (29/5/17).

The proportion of articles with a mainstream media critique was roughly a third for *The Canary*, *Skwakwbox* and *Evolve Politics*, compared to roughly two in 10 articles in *Novara Media*. In right-wing alternative media sites, *The Conservative Woman* had, by far, the most intensive editorial focus on critiquing mainstream media, with 28.9% of all its articles containing some sort of evaluation, including stories entitled: “The BBC stacks the deck against grammar schools—no surprise there” (27/5/17) and “The Telegraph Wimmin’s section—a fact-free zone” (12/10/16). Other right-wing sites had between 3 and 5 times proportionally fewer items about mainstream media, featuring in a total of 8.3% of articles in *Breitbart*, 8.1% in *Guido Fawkes* and 5.4% in *Westmonster*.

**Table 1.** Percentage of alternative media items that include a critique of mainstream media (*N* in brackets).

	2015		2016		2017		2018		Total
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Left wing sites	18.6% (13)	81.4% (57)	36.8% (63)	63.2% (108)	38.1% (313)	61.9% (508)	21.9% (57)	78.1% (203)	100.0% (1322)
Right wing sites	16.1% (48)	83.9% (250)	9.4% (30)	90.6% (289)	10.3% (106)	89.7% (919)	7.2% (35)	92.8% (453)	100.0% (2130)

**Table 2.** Percentage of alternative media items that include a critique of mainstream media (*N* in brackets).

	Yes	No	Total
<i>Left wing sites</i>			
The Canary	33.3%	66.7%	100% (726)
Skwawkbox	32.2%	67.8%	100% (329)
Evolve Politics	29.4%	70.6%	100% (102)
Another Angry Voice	45.6%	54.4%	100% (136)
Novara Media	20.7%	79.3%	100% (29)
<i>Right wing sites</i>			
Guido Fawkes	8.1%	91.9%	100% (849)
Breitbart UK	8.3%	91.7%	100% (626)
Westmonster	5.4%	94.6%	100% (389)
The Conservative Woman	28.9%	71.1%	100% (266)
Total	100%	100%	100% (3452)

When the changing focus of mainstream media critique between 2015 and 2018 was examined, the differences between right-wing and left-wing sites were brought into sharper focus (see Table 3). All sites produced far more articles in 2018 compared to when they first launched. In this respect, the volume of articles featuring some form of mainstream critique increased over time. However, in proportional terms, on some sites (*Another Angry Voice*, *Novara Media* and *Breitbart*) coverage of professional journalism reduced when their agenda in 2015 is compared with 2018.

Perhaps the most striking level of coverage towards mainstream media was evident during the 2017 election campaign, which we examined over six weeks (not three weeks). In this critical period of time, which made up well over half of the total sample of items, intensive scrutiny of political coverage was on full display, with 38.0% of items in left-wing sites featuring a critique of mainstream media (see Table 3). *Another Angry Voice*, for example, had 46.2% of its articles about mainstream media, while *The Canary* at 38.5%, *The Skwawkbox* at 36.2% and *Evolve Politics* at 32.1%, also made professional journalism a prominent part of coverage. For alternative right-wing sites, *The Conservative Woman* stood out since it increased its editorial critique of mainstream media, with almost a third—32.7%—of items dedicated to this topic over the campaign period.

When we examined the nature of mainstream media critique references, we found the vast majority of them—92.4% in total—were critical in tone, while the remaining 7.6% of the references praised an outlet, specific journalist or the mainstream media more generally (see Table 4). In order to assess the tone of media critiques, we also examined whether either criticism or praise was overt or implied (excluding any that were unclear).

There was a clear majority of critiques about mainstream media—over eight in 10 in total—that were overtly critical in tone. This overt hostility to mainstream media was in almost equal measure for both alternative right-wing and left-wing sites, making up 81.5% of all media critiques. On the left, *Another Angry Voice*, *Novara Media* and *The Canary* were the most critical in tone towards mainstream media, along with the alternative right-wing site, *The Conservative Woman*. Typical examples of overt criticism included statements such as, “The vicious anti-Corbyn bias of the mainstream media” (*Another Angry Voice*, 27/05/2017) and “propaganda minions at The S\*n” (*Another Angry Voice*, 24/05/2017), or claiming that the BBC has a “demonstrable bias against Jeremy Corbyn” (*The Canary*, 18/10/2016) or regularly using the term “mainstream media bias” (*Canary*, 07/05/2020).

**Table 3.** Percentage of alternative media items that include a critique of mainstream media between 2015 and 2018 (*N* in brackets).

	2015		2016		2017		2018		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		
<i>Left wing sites</i>										
Canary	14.5% (9)	85.5% 2. (53)	35.2% (37)	64.8% (68)	38.5% (162)	61.5% (259)	24.6% (34)	75.4% (104)	100% (726)	
Sk'box	–	–	41.9% (13)	58.1% (18)	36.2% (76)	63.8% (134)	19.3% (17)	80.7% (71)	100% (329)	YES
Evolve Politics	–	100.0% (1)	40.9% (9)	61.9% (13)	32.1% (18)	67.8% (38)	13.0% (3)	87.0% (20)	100% (102)	(33.7) 446
AAV	50.0% (2)	50.0% (2)	50.0% (3)	50.0% (3)	46.2% (55)	53.8% (64)	28.6% (2)	71.4% (5)	100% (136)	NO
Novara Media	66.7% (2)	33.3% (1)	14.3% (1)	85.7% (6)	13.3% (2)	86.7% (13)	25.0% (1)	75.0% (3)	100% (29)	(66.3) 876
Total	18.6% (13)	81.4% (57)	36.8% (63)	63.2% (108)	38.1% (313)	61.9 (508)	21.9% (57)	78.1% (203)	100.0 (1322)	
<i>Right wing sites</i>										
Guido Fawkes	15.4% (20)	84.6% (110)	8.1% (11)	91.9% (125)	7.8% (32)	92.2% (378)	3.5% (6)	96.5% (167)	100% (849)	
Breitbart UK	17.0% (23)	83.0% (112)	1.5% (2)	98.5% (133)	7.6% (20)	92.4% (243)	7.5% (7)	92.5% (86)	100% (626)	YES
West'er	–	–	–	–	7.4% (18)	92.6% (224)	2.0% (3)	98.0% (144)	100% (389)	10.3 (219)
CW	15.2% (5)	84.8% (28)	35.4% (17)	64.6% (31)	32.7% (36)	67.3% (74)	25.3% (19)	74.7% (56)	100% (266)	NO
TOT	16.1% (48)	83.9% (250)	9.4% (30)	90.6% (289)	10.3% (106)	89.7% (919)	7.2% (35)	92.8% (453)	100.0 (2130)	89.7 (1911)
Overall Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0	
<i>N</i>	61	307	93	397	419	1427	92	656	3452	

**Table 4.** Percentage of the type of media critique references by tone (*N* in brackets).

	Overt criticism	Implied criticism	Overt praise	Implied praise	Total
<i>Left wing sites</i>					
Canary	83.8% (537)	9.8% (63)	2.2% (14)	4.3% (27)	100.0% (641)
Another Angry Voice	89.6% (1380)	5.2% (8)	2.6% (4)	2.6% (4)	100.0% (154)
Skwawkbox	72.3% (167)	13.8% (32)	13.4% (31)	0.4% (1)	100.0% (231)
Evolve Politics	68.4% (26)	21.1% (8)	5.3% (2)	2.6% (1)	100.0% (38)
Novara Media	85.7% (6)	–	–	14.3% (1)	100.0% (7)
Total	81.6% (874)	10.4% (111)	4.9% (52)	3.2% (34)	100.0% (1071)
<i>Right wing sites</i>					
Westmonster	77.8% (14)	16.7% (3)	5.6% (1)	–	100.0% (18)
Guido Fawkes	70.2% (59)	16.7% (14)	10.7% (9)	2.4% (2)	100.0% (84)
Breitbart UK	78.7% (85)	21.3% (23)	–	–	100.0% (108)
The Conservative Woman	89.4% (143)	3.8% (6)	2.5% (4)	4.4% (7)	100.0% (160)
Total	81.4% (301)	12.4% (46)	3.8% (14)	2.4% (9)	100.0% (370)
Overall	81.5% (1175)	10.9% (157)	4.6% (66)	3.0% (43)	100.0% (1441)

*The Conservative Woman* typically included direct accusations that the *BBC* was biased, or that individual journalists, such as Jeremy Paxman, have a party-political agenda (*The Conservative Woman*, 30/05/2017). Examples of implied criticism included sarcastic comments such as “we’re very lucky to have a proud, free, and independent press” (*The Canary*, 13/10/2015), or a pointed reference to a concentration media ownership like “Considering Rupert Murdoch’s News UK controls a third of our national newspapers” (*The Canary*, 10/10/2016). A consistent theme of implied praise was the perception that journalists were holding politicians to account. For example, a Conservative politician, Michael Fallon, was under pressure in an interview over a set of statistics, “after Andrew Marr actually quoted it to him” (*Another Angry Voice*, 14.05.2017). Overt praise often focused on the quality of journalism, such as “the interview was painstakingly fair” (*Guido Fawkes*, 09/05/2017) or a “standing ovation for #BlackpoolGazette for world-class #ToryTrolling” (*Skwawkbox*, 06/06/2017).

We did not identify any meaningful patterns in the changing tone of coverage across either left-wing or right-wing sites between 2015 and 2018. Overall, when alternative media sites featured mainstream media in their coverage they were, most of the time, *overtly* critical of professional journalism.

## The Object of Media Critiques

In order to explore the object of alternative media criticism of mainstream media, we assessed whether every substantive mention was related to either an individual journalist or editor, a publication or outlet, a media leader or owner, or if it was a more general reference to mainstream media or alternative media. As [Table 5](#) shows, above all critiques of the mainstream media were most prominently directed at specific publications or outlets, especially right-wing alternative media sites.

Just over six in 10 articles on right-wing sites—61.6%—focused their mainstream critique about specific publications or outlets compared to 43.6% of items in alternative left-wing media. It was only *Another Angry Voice* that contained a high level of references to mainstream media—45.5% in total—among left-wing sites. Left-wing alternative media sites, in total, focused on invoking mainstream media in roughly a third of all articles, such as *Another Angry Voice*’s “13 questions mainstream media should be

**Table 5.** Percentage of media critique references about either journalists, editors, specific programmes or media generally (*N* in brackets).

	IJ	IEIC	P/O	L/O	GRMSM	GRAM	Total
<i>Left wing sites</i>							
Canary	15.1% (97)	0.5% 2. (3)	47.0% (303)	7.5% (48)	29.3% (189)	0.6% (4)	100.0% (644)
Another Angry Voice	6.5% (10)	–	37.0% (57)	9.1% (14)	45.5% (70)	1.9% (3)	100.0% (154)
Skwawkbox	20.7% (48)	0.4% (1)	37.9% (88)	3.4% (8)	35.3% (82)	2.2% (5)	100.0% (232)
Evolve Politics	10.5% (4)	–	47.4% (18)	–	42.1% (16)	–	100.0% (38)
Novara Media	–	–	42.9% (3)	–	42.9% (3)	14.3% (1)	100.0% (7)
Total	14.8% (159)	0.4% (4)	43.6% (469)	6.5% (70)	33.4% (360)	1.2% (13)	100.0% (1075)
<i>Right wing sites</i>							
Westmonster	11.1% (2)	16.7% (3)	55.6% (10)	5.6% (1)	11.1% (2)	–	100.0% (18)
Guido Fawkes	24.4% (21)	1.2% (1)	67.4% (58)	3.5% (3)	2.3% (2)	1.2% (1)	100.0% (86)
Breitbart UK	26.6% (29)	0.9% (1)	58.7% (64)	0.9% (1)	12.8% (14)	–	100.0% (109)
The Conservative Woman	29.3% (49)	2.4% (4)	61.1% (102)	0.6% (1)	6.6% (11)	–	100.0% (167)
Total	26.6% (101)	2.4% (9)	61.6% (234)	1.6% (6)	7.6% (29)	0.3% (1)	100.0% (380)
Total	17.9% (260)	0.9% (13)	48.3% (703)	5.2% (76)	26.7% (389)	1.0% (14)	100.0% (1455)

NB: IJ – Individual Journalist, IEIC – Individual Editor in Chief, P/O – Publication/Outlet, L/O – Leader/Ownership, GRMSM – General reference to MSM, GRAM – General reference to Alt Media.

**Table 6.** Percentage of media critiques about specific mainstream media outlets (*N* in brackets).

	BBC	OB	RWNM	LWNM	RAM	LAM	Other	Total
<i>Left wing sites</i>								
Canary	33.0% (146)	8.6% (38)	35.3% (156)	12.4% (55)	0.5% (2)	–	10.2% (45)	100.0% (442)
Another Angry Voice	7.4% (5)	2.9% (2)	76.5% (52)	2.9% (2)	/	1.5% (1)	8.8% (6)	100.0% (68)
Skwawkbox	43.0% (55)	5.5% (7)	14.1% (18)	15.6% (20)	4.7% (6)	10.9% (14)	6.3% (8)	100.0% (128)
Evolve Politics	18.2% (4)	13.6% (3)	27.3% (6)	27.3% (6)	/	/	13.6% (3)	100.0% (22)
Novara Media	33.3% (1)	–	33.3% (1)	33.3% (1)	/	/	–	100.0% (3)
Total	31.8% (211)	7.5% (50)	35.1% (233)	12.7% (84)	1.2% (8)	2.3% (15)	9.4% (62)	100.0% (663)
<i>Right wing sites</i>								
Westmonster	43.8% (7)	25.0% (4)	12.5% (2)	/	/	/	18.8% (3)	100.0% (16)
Guido Fawkes	27.7% (26)	5.3% (5)	22.3% (21)	20.2% (19)	/	14.9% (14)	9.6% (9)	100.0% (94)
Breitbart UK	37.9% (36)	14.7% (14)	16.8% (16)	18.9% (18)	1.1% (1)	–	10.5% (10)	100.0% (95)
The Conservative Woman	74.2% (115)	2.6% (4)	9.0% (14)	7.1% (11)	1.9% (3)	0.6% (1)	4.5% (7)	100.0% (155)
Total	51.1% (184)	7.5% (27)	14.7% (53)	13.3% (48)	1.1% (4)	4.2% (15)	8.1% (29)	100.0% (360)
Overall	38.6% (395)	7.5% (77)	28.0% (286)	12.9% (132)	1.2% (12)	2.9% (30)	8.9% (91)	100.0% (1023)

N.B: BBC – BBC; OB – other broadcasters; RWNM – Right wing newspapers or magazines; LWNM – Left wing newspapers or magazines; RAM – Right Alt Media and LAM – Left Alt Media.

asking about Salman Abedi” (29/5/17) and *The Canary’s* “A filmmaker has accused the mainstream media of ‘disgusting’ bullying of Jeremy Corbyn” (3/6/17). In alternative right-wing media, general criticism towards mainstream media amounted to just 7.6% of articles. Instead, individual journalists were the objects of critique far more in right-wing sites, making up 26.6% of all media critique articles compared to 14.8% in alternative left-wing media.

Between 2015 and 2018, many sites had a consistent focus in their critiques of mainstream media. But there were some interesting changes over time. *The Canary*, for example, became less focused on mainstream media generally and more centred on singling out individual journalists. To a lesser extent, alternative right-wing sites—*Westmonster*, *Breitbart* and *The Conservative Woman*—also increased their focus on individual journalists after 2015. To understand more fully which news organisations were subject to most alternative media attention, we classified the main focus of critiques into the following categories: the *BBC*, other broadcasters, right wing newspapers and magazines, left-wing newspapers and magazines, alternative right-wing media, alternative left-wing media and other media (and excluded any that did not reference a specific outlet). [Table 6](#) shows, overall, the *BBC* was the outlet that attracted most attention. [Table 7](#) reveals that the volume and proportion of coverage overtly or implicitly critical of the *BBC* was at its highest during the 2017 general election campaign.

Over the four-year study, other broadcasters did not prominently feature in alternative media to the same degree as the *BBC*, with the exception of *Westmonster*, where they made up a quarter critiques about mainstream media.

However, for left-wing alternative media it was both right-wing newspapers and magazines, and the *BBC*, that made up almost equal focus—35.1% and 33.8% respectively—in their critiques of specific mainstream media outlets. Even within alternative left-wing media sites, there was some variation in focus. For example, 76.5% of *Another Angry Voice* mainstream media critiques focused on right-wing newspapers and magazines, compared to just 14.1% on *The Skwawkbox*. Of all the left-wing sites, *Skwawkbox* was the most pre-occupied with the *BBC*, making up 43% of its items when a specific mainstream media outlet was critiqued.

Just over half (51.1%) of alternative right-wing media sites focused on the *BBC* in their critiques of mainstream media. All right-wing sites made the public service broadcaster a central part of their coverage of mainstream media. By far, *The Conservative Woman* stood out as the most vocal critic, with nearly three in four of its items centred on the *BBC*. Examples of its coverage included articles headlined: “BBC Election Watch: ‘Impartial’ BBC website loads dice against Tories” (15/5/17) and “David Keighley’s BBC Election Watch: Past it Paxman left Corbyn in the clear” (30/5/17). Unsurprisingly, alternative left-wing media sites focused more attention on right-wing newspapers and magazines

**Table 7.** Percentage of media critiques expressing either overt or implicit criticism of the *BBC* (*N* in brackets).

Year	Right-wing sites	Left-wing sites	Percentage
2015	92.9% (13)	7.1% (1)	3.8% (14)
2016	52.0% (26)	48.0% (24)	13.6% (50)
2017	40.2% (103)	59.8% (153)	69.4% (256)
2018	65.3% (32)	34.7% (17)	13.3% (49)
Total	47.1 (174)	195 (52.8)	100.0% (369)

than right-wing alternative media sites. But interestingly, with the exception of *Breitbart*, all alternative right-wing media sites were more critical of right-wing newspapers and magazines than left-wing newspapers and magazines.

Finally, we examined the topics about mainstream media in alternative media sites (Table 8). We found a broadly similar editorial focus across most alternative media sites when mainstream media were mentioned.

Above all, a perceived bias or lack of impartiality made up approximately half of all alternative media articles about mainstream media. An example of a perceived lack of impartiality included a story headlined: “A BBC editor has spelled out why the broadcaster’s bias is justified, and it’s utterly outrageous” (*The Canary*, 14/10/2016). Comparing coverage over time, for most sites it was during the 2017 general election campaign when criticism of mainstream media bias and breaches of impartiality were most apparent. Indeed, as Table 9 shows, over seven in 10 of these items— 71.0%—occurred during the 2017 election campaign.

Questioning the quality of mainstream media coverage was the next most reported topic at 15.9% and 16.1% on left-wing and right-wing sites respectively. An example of how the quality of media coverage was questioned included an item headlined: “The media keeps elevating fascists while ignoring minorities. This must stop now” (*The Canary*, 18.10.18). Issues related to the factual accuracy of mainstream media featured in 14.7% and 11.1% of left-wing and right-wing sites respectively. For example, one headline about factual accuracy read: “ITV has been scolded over an interview with Nicola Sturgeon”, in which a journalist was criticised for the presentation of statistics (*The Canary*, 23.10.2018). Another notable topic was story omissions by mainstream media—what was not reported, but should have been according to alternative media sites—making up 12.2% of articles about mainstream media criticism in left-wing media, but just 6.3% in right-wing media.

## The Editorial Agenda of Alternative Media: Why National Media Systems Matter

We found critiques of mainstream media were published in roughly two in every 10 articles in left-wing alternative media and three in every 20 articles in right-wing alternative media. The vast majority of critiques about mainstream media—92.4% in total—were highly critical in tone across right-wing and left-wing sites, with few stories over the four-year study signalling any support towards or praise about professional journalism. When the object of criticism was isolated, we discovered nearly two thirds of alternative right-wing media items focused on specific publications or outlets compared to 43.5% in alternative left-wing media. Alternative left-wing media invoked criticism of the MSM generally in roughly a third of articles featuring a media critique. By contrast, in alternative right-wing media it amounted to under one in ten articles. We found individual journalists were targets of more attention in right-wing than left-wing sites. For example, *The Canary* increased its editorial focus on specific journalists tenfold over time (from 2.9% in 2015 to 21.8% in 2018). All right-wing sites also enhanced their critique of specific journalists, but to a lesser extent than left-wing media.

Above all, the *BBC* was the central focus of criticism on left-wing and right-wing alternative media, reflecting nearly half of all critiques about mainstream media over

**Table 8.** Percentage of media critiques by topics in alternative media sites (N in brackets).

	FA	I/B	Q	CO	C + R	Other	Total
<i>Left wing sites</i>							
Canary	14.6% (94)	52.3% (337)	13.2% (85)	13.0% (84)	0.8% (5)	6.1% (39)	100.0% (644)
Another Angry Voice	5.8% (9)	61.7% (95)	15.6% (24)	9.1% (14)	3.9% (6)	3.9% (6)	100.0% (154)
Skwawkbox	21.1% (49)	37.9% (88)	22.0% (51)	12.5% (29)	–	6.5% (15)	100.0% (232)
Evolve Politics	15.8% (6)	36.8% (14)	28.9% (11)	10.5% (4)	–	7.9% (3)	100.0% (38)
Novara Media	–	71.4% (5)	–	–	28.6% (2)	–	100.0% (7)
Total	14.7% (158)	50.1% (539)	15.9% (171)	12.2% (131)	1.2% (13)	5.9% (63)	100.0% (1075)
<i>Right wing sites</i>							
Westmonster	5.6% (1)	61.1% (11)	5.6% (1)	–	22.2% (4)	5.6% (1)	100.0% (18)
Guido Fawkes	22.1% (19)	23.3% (20)	34.9% (30)	7.0% (6)	–	12.8% (11)	100.0% (86)
Breitbart UK	14.7% (16)	50.5% (55)	8.3% (9)	6.4% (7)	15.6% (17)	4.6% (5)	100.0% (109)
The Conservative Woman	3.6% (6)	59.6% (99)	12.7% (21)	6.6% (11)	12.7% (21)	4.8% (8)	100.0% (166)
Total	11.1% (42)	48.8% (185)	16.1% (61)	6.3% (24)	11.1% (42)	6.6% (25)	100.0% (379)
Overall	13.7% (200)	49.8% (724)	16.0% (232)	10.7% (155)	3.8% (55)	6.1% (88)	100.0% (1454)

N.B: FA – Factual Accuracy; IB – Impartiality/Bias; Q – Quality; CO – Coverage Omissions; C + R – Culture and Regulations; Other – Other.

**Table 9.** Percentage of media critiques expressing either overt or implicit criticism about impartiality/bias in alternative media sites (*N* in brackets).

Year	Right-wing sites	Left-wing sites	Percentage
2015	46.9% (23)	53.1% (26)	6.8% (49)
2016	26.2% (28)	73.8% (79)	15.1% (107)
2017	21.8% (110)	78.2% (395)	71.0% (505)
2018	40.4% (21)	59.6% (31)	7.2% (52)
Total	25.5% (182)	74.5% (531)	100.0% (713)

four years. This editorial scrutiny of the UK's main public service broadcaster grew over time and was particularly prominent during the 2017 general election campaign. The topic that most exercised both alternative right-wing and left-wing sites was a perceived media bias or lack of impartiality in broadcast media. This alone made up approximately half of alternative media articles about mainstream media. Overall, we found UK alternative media were routinely critical about the mainstream media and their coverage of politics, with BBC news often singled out for not reporting impartially (cf. Cushion 2021a).

How, then, should our findings be interpreted more widely? Our study empirically revealed how regularly UK alternative media were openly hostile to mainstream media. Not only that, it highlighted the focal point of this opposition, which, for the most part, was not about the mainstream media generally. For alternative left-wing media, it was targeting right-wing partisan outlets. And for both alternative left- and right-wing sites, it was critical coverage of BBC journalism, the UK's main public service broadcaster. At the heart of this alternative media criticism was a perceived bias in professional journalism and a lack of impartiality in broadcast media.

In our view, this editorial focus demonstrates the importance of *understanding national media systems* when analysing the nature of alternative media criticism towards mainstream media and professional journalism. After all, alternative media criticism was often centred on the UK's right-wing national press system and its national broadcast ecology, especially the BBC. The UK's mix of public and private broadcasting, and a highly partisan and agenda-setting press, represents a distinctive media system when compared to many other nations (Curran 2010). This hybrid national media system is reflected in UK alternative media coverage of mainstream media. By contrast, Rauch's (2021) analysis of alternative media in the US found many left-wing audiences favoured the BBC, as well as the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in America, in part because of their perceived impartiality. Their opposition to mainstream media was centred on America's hypercommercialised media system, which was seen to undermine the quality of mainstream journalism. In other words, it is the *specific characteristics of mainstream media in national systems that drives the editorial agenda of alternative media and the nature of criticism directed at professional journalism*.

While all UK broadcasters are legally required to be impartial, it is the BBC's editorial choices that, by far, face most regulatory and media scrutiny, attracting widespread public attention. As Barwise and York (2020) suggest in their book, *The War Against the BBC*, over recent decades there has been an unprecedented combination of hostile forces that routinely attack the UK's main public service broadcaster. Historically, this was largely driven by commercial media but today it also comes from new online and social media platforms. Given the influence of BBC news and its public service funding model, it is understandable why the institution is routinely held to account for its editorial

choices. There have been legitimate criticisms of the *BBC* and its interpretation of impartiality in coverage of politics and public affairs (Freedman 2019), as there have been about UK broadcasting more generally (Cushion and Thomas 2019). Viewed in this light, alternative media are reflecting some of the concerns about the practices and values of professional journalism. Of course, more qualitative close textual research is needed to evaluate whether their critiques of mainstream media are generally legitimate lines of inquiry or a product of partisanship (see Cushion 2021b).

What our quantitative study revealed was that alternative media most often focused on just the *BBC's* impartiality, rather than other broadcast media. In our view, this suggests that alternative media criticism of mainstream media was largely driven by partisan attacks towards the *BBC* rather than an editorial interest in raising legitimate concerns about bias or impartiality in professional journalism. How highly partisan newspapers and magazines report politics was not subject to the same level of criticism as the *BBC*.

From both sides of the political spectrum, our study established that if more people are *exposed* to alternative media in the UK they are more likely to *encounter* criticism of mainstream media, especially directed at *BBC* journalism and its perceived lack of impartiality. We cannot assume cause and effect, of course, since audiences could be exposed to alternative media content without necessarily being influenced by it. But a study of five nations—Italy, Poland, the US, Switzerland and Denmark—with different levels of fragmentation and polarisation in their media environments suggested that alternative media were having an impact on audience perceptions towards mainstream media (Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020). In comparative surveys in each nation, Steppat, Herrero, and Esser (2020, 330) found “the higher the level of fragmentation and polarisation, the worse the perceived news performance, especially with regard to journalistic independence and objectivity”. They further argued that “The use of alternative news media sources seems to promote people’s image that the news media performs poorly” (Steppat, Herrero, and Esser 2020, 331). Similarly, from a US perspective, Ladd (2013) explored the decline of public trust in mainstream media by examining coverage of alternative media. He discovered alternative media content nurtured mistrust of mainstream media, most strikingly among Conservative audiences with right-wing views. They were also more cynical about professional journalism than Liberal audiences with left-wing perspectives about politics and public affairs.

Based on the information supply of alternative media in the UK, our study reinforced the case that people *exposed* to left-wing and right-wing sites were *more likely to encounter* critical coverage of mainstream media, in particular about the *BBC*. In the case of the UK, survey research has found public trust in mainstream media has fallen over recent years, especially among left-wing voters (Newman et al. 2020). While the study discovered the *BBC* remained the most trusted news organisation, longitudinal data showed that for people holding either left-wing or right-wing views, their trust in the UK’s main public service broadcaster fell by a fifth over a two-year period between 2018 and 2020. Since alternative media sites tend to be made up of audiences with strong ideological views (Kalogeropoulos and Newman 2018), this suggests their critical coverage of mainstream media could be having an impact on audience attitudes towards professional journalism, in particular *BBC* news output.

Put more generally, this means an increase in the consumption of alternative media could lead to a greater mistrust in mainstream media and professional journalism. This,

in our view, has significant long-term consequences that warrants far more scholarly attention and research about how people become informed about politics and public affairs. After all, if more people rely on alternative media, it could influence not only how much trust they have in professional journalism, but how much faith they invest in democratic decision-making and society more widely. Our study has revealed the degree to which alternative media focus on mainstream media and the type of criticism they routinely receive from both right-wing and left-wing sites. But future research should address how alternative media audiences engage with the content of different sites across national media systems, including how they portray mainstream media and professional journalism. There is also a need to explore the editorial motivations of right-wing and left-wing alternative media sites across different countries, and assess the influence national media systems have in shaping the tone, style and nature of coverage.

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