

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

RIGHT-WING
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Kristoffer Holt

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Right-Wing Alternative Media

This book offers a fresh perspective on central questions related to right-wing alternative media: Can right-wing media be alternative? Why do they exist? Are they a threat to the existing order and what have the reactions been from mainstream politicians and media actors?

The rise and success of right-wing populism in the political life of many western countries, along with several new and apparently successful alternative media operations on the right, has caused surprise and confusion among researchers and debaters. How should this challenge to mainstream politics and media be understood? Journalistic, political and academic discourse has struggled to explain these tendencies and tends to focus on sensational and extreme examples, with little attention directed towards other aspects. This book critically discusses existing theoretical frameworks related to alternative media in general, analysing a wide scope of cases to illustrate the diversity of voices in alternative media on the right and highlighting the importance of intellectual coolness and common sense in discussions about this important but ideologically and politically charged area.

An important addition to the current discourse of contemporary media, *Right-Wing Alternative Media* is ideal for researchers, students and anyone interested in politics and public discourse.

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Right-Wing Alternative Media

Kristoffer Holt

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Introduction

On Friday 15 March 2019, a shooter entered two mosques during the Friday prayer in Christchurch, New Zealand: The Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Mosque. Fifty one people were shot dead and numerous more were wounded. The victims were picked randomly and with no discrimination, even children were gunned down. The shooter, a 28-year-old Australian citizen, acted, in his own words, as a soldier at war to take revenge on the “invaders for the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by foreign invaders in European lands throughout history.” The attack was live streamed through Facebook, using a body camera, and the video was widely circulated, since copies of it kept being uploaded in various social media even after it had been banned. Many mainstream media outlets, like in the UK, MailOnline, the Mirror and The Sun, published edited versions online (but chose to take it down quite soon after publishing it). His preparations before the attack indicate that he aimed to obtain maximum media attention. He published a manifesto that was also made available to the public through the media, either with links to the full text or through summaries of the content. The Christchurch terrorist was soon reported to be a person “marinated” in extremist online culture. He was active on forums like 4chan and 8chan, renowned for unbridled racist and misogynistic meme culture (Nagle, 2017). His manifesto is full of references to the most common tropes of the more extreme right-wing alternative media and online subcultures: The birth rate of whites is declining throughout the world, while the birth rate of immigrants in predominantly white nations is higher, and this will in the future cause a replacement of the white population; Muslims in particular are therefore an existential threat to Europe and other countries hitherto ruled by European descendants; the political elites are contributing to this development and constitute a threat for the future of white children and women. Especially he named Islamist terror-attacks and

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the number of immigrants who rape white women. He rebukes those men who are passive and do not take action to change the course of history, and he foretells a future in which white men throughout the world will become radicalized and take up arms in order to take back their countries. The purpose of the attack was to create more division and polarization in order to speed up the process.

As if journalists and reporters throughout the world were unable to read between the lines of the terrorist's careful PR management of the attack, many immediately did exactly what he wanted them to do (as clearly indicated in his manifesto): Start quarrels about stricter gun laws and connect the dots between violent far-right extremism, white supremacy and populism in general (and Donald Trump in particular), thereby fuelling the polarization and division that is already present in western countries – exactly as the terrorist wished. And this is, indeed, a sensitive and painful issue in today's debate in many countries. Polarization is largely regarded as one of the most salient problems in modern democracies, since its effects are manifested so obviously through mainstream news reporting as well as in our social media and alternative providers of news and views, and thus not only involving rational disagreement about opinion, but increasingly fuelling unwillingness to compromise (Grafstein, 2018). The terrorist thus cynically exploited both the social media giants and their inability to stop the live stream from spreading as well as the polarized state of public discourse for making his message have maximum impact.

This sinister attack on people, gathered in a house of worship, coincided with the deadline for this book, and, sadly, the events put the topic of it – right-wing alternative media – in a gloomy perspective, because it puts the spotlight on the most extreme cases of alternative media, those which incite to hatred, violence and the destruction of our societies. These clearly exist and must be taken seriously as a phenomenon in its own right. But, on the other hand, what happens when radicalized individuals who find support and encouragement in online spheres where extreme views are promoted and shared commit real acts of terror, it does render them more powerful and influential than they actually are, especially when the news media are so Pavlovianly fascinated with sensational and spectacular events. Having studied the whole spectrum of right-wing alternative media (and especially immigration critical alternative media) for several years, my view is that this is only a small part of the whole story and that failure to acknowledge this only fuels the polarization further. Politicians and activists are often quick in turning such events, committed by twisted individuals, into political points by trying to imply connections between their

opponents' views and those of the perpetrator. Journalists, commentators and even scholars too often uncritically follow their lead and solidify such narratives further. One of the main aims of this book is to offer my insights about right-wing alternative media from a scholarly perspective, while trying to avoid such tendencies as much as possible.

It is easy to get the impression that there are serious problems in the realm of public discourse throughout the western world. Journalism is under pressure, polarization is tearing our cultures and social worlds apart, and public trust in the media as a source of reliable information is constantly undermined by populist rhetoric – and, to be fair, by declining general quality and lack of impartiality of mainstream journalism. In the US, President Donald Trump has been engaged in a veritable war with the big media houses ever since his campaign was launched to run for president in 2016. CNN reporter Jim Acosta was deprived of his “hard pass” and thus access to the White House press conferences after he refused to leave the microphone during a press conference where he questioned the president’s policies. After a judicial decision, Acosta regained his credentials quite soon, and a legal process awaits to determine whether the White House restricted Acosta’s freedom of expression. This happened only a week after home-made pipe bombs were sent to CNN’s New York editorial by a fanatical Trump supporter with mental problems. As an observer from the outside, watching the major American news networks for just one day leaves one with the impression of a system that is essentially broken. These tendencies, perhaps at present most blatantly visible in American public discourse, are, however, not an isolated phenomenon. Throughout the world, journalism is struggling.

The Washington Post co-worker Jamal Khashoggi, described as a moderate critic of the Saudi regime, was brutally murdered on 2 October 2018, during a visit to the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul, by Saudi agents. At the same time, 319 journalists have been arrested in Turkey since the coup attempt there on 15 July 2016, of which around 180 are still in custody (Turkeypurge.com). In Russia, 58 journalists have been murdered since 1992 (CPJ, 2018). Around the world, many journalists testify of an everyday life where it has become normal with both hateful messages in the inbox and direct threats to their own person. In Sweden, 58% of the country’s journalists report that they have at some time been subjected to threats, harassment and violence in their professional role (Nilsson, 2017). In social media there is recurring disinformation and propaganda campaigns with the aim of creating confusion and hostility between different groups – often through links to polarizing and tendentious information or completely false statements (Faris et al., 2017).

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There is no doubt that media – in general thought of as a platform for public discourse – is facing challenges today, challenges that will be necessary to deal with also in the future: Distrust and hostility towards media and journalists; “fake news” and propaganda campaigns in social media.¹ These phenomena are, however, problematic to discuss on many levels, especially as the public debate around them tends to be fuelled by indignation and conducted in falsetto – often with more opinion than facts as a basis. What these challenges have in common is that they are, in various ways, an expression of the vulnerability of journalism in a globalized and digitized world. The professionalism and business model of news journalism is challenged; journalist’s competence and claim to convey objective/impartial, truthful and relevant information is strongly questioned by many, and individual journalists’ safety and freedom to manoeuvre is narrowed, often by self-censorship. The harsh political climate also puts journalism’s societal monitoring function in an uncomfortable spot. Media actors are increasingly drawn into the game of power and are tempted to become an active party in the ongoing conflicts (Mancini, 2013). This is, again, perhaps most evident in the US, where the big TV companies such as Fox News Network, CNN and MSNBC do not even try to pretend that they are impartial anymore. Instead, news reporting is conducted in the manner of a full-scale war, and for the audience there is no doubt about which side the respective channels are on – which also informs their choice of news (Medders & Metzger, 2018).

Why do I start a book about right-wing alternative media on this note? Simply because this is the setting in which right-wing alternative media tends to be debated. If you allow me to oversimplify for the sake of demonstration, there are mainly two explanatory models for the reasons behind the conundrum western culture, and politics finds itself in at this point: The first one simplistically assumes a priori that mainstream journalism is something good and noble in itself and that its holy mission is threatened and under attack from evil right-wing politicians and alternative media operations (probably in secret collaborating with Russian agents and trolls) who deliberately wants to deceive the public, inflict propaganda and incite to hatred. The other extreme would instead argue that since the mainstream media are just acting as puppets of certain powerful political interests, and mouth-pieces of the politically correct ruling class with progressive values, they ignore the real issues of ordinary people and actively try to silence dissenters who criticize them and who speak uncomfortable truths. The growth of alternative media is then seen as a natural, necessary and healthy reaction in response to a corrupt and biased media industry, as a “glitch in the Matrix,” as one debater has put it.²

Of course, such one-sided descriptions need to be refined, but in general, and to my surprise, these are basically the lines along which the debate can be summarized. There is not much hope for any consensus or progression in terms of mutual understanding here. Against this background, this book is an attempt to summarize what I have learned from doing research about various kinds of right-wing alternative media during the past five years.³ It has been a difficult book to write, since things keep happening and the media landscape is changing at a rapid pace. I first started taking an interest in immigration critical alternative media in 2014, while doing other research about citizen journalism in Sweden. I noticed a number of blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook pages and pods that all had the same thing in common: Strong opposition towards Sweden's immigration politics and equally strong aversion against the mainstream media, who were described as mainly driven by left-wing/liberal activists who saw it as their job to educate the public to approve of a generous immigration system and to explain away all possible problems related to the high influx of immigrants in Sweden. This was before the migration crisis of 2015, before Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election, before Brexit, before the PEGIDA marches in Germany, before the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and before the yellow vest protests in France and other countries. The intensity and level of engagement that I observed in the Swedish immigration critical counter movements was apparently not an isolated phenomenon – it turned out to be a manifestation of sentiments held widely in many parts of Europe and the rest of the world. And in all this, various forms of alternative media have played a crucial role.

It is not strange that we today see alternative media that express alternative right-wing views in many parts of the world. We live in turbulent times, and many countries are going through dramatic cultural and demographic changes that affect people's lives at many levels. Immigration is certainly the most pressing issue of the time that dramatically affects and challenges the collective identities of nation states, puts pressure on the welfare systems and sometimes invites to cultural clashes between newcomers and the natives. It is, however, not only the immigration issue that seems to mobilize parts of the public in acts of resistance against what is perceived as a hegemonic system that looks out for the interests of the ruling elite, while forcing rhetoric of a world without borders down the throat of ordinary people who have to suffer the consequences. While focusing mainly on the immigration issue in alternative media, I have also realized that this burning issue is linked to a larger discourse of opposition to a generally "progressive" agenda. Here are some examples of viewpoints frequently voiced in various right-wing alternative media:

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Globalization itself, and the social consequences of it (such as decreased sovereignty of nation states and the shipping away of factory jobs to low-wage countries), is questioned as many find themselves as the losers that are sacrificed on the altars of politically correct virtue signalling (and profit for global corporations). Increasingly, and in a similar fashion, resistance against various policy implementations inspired or dictated by gender ideology is causing widespread opposition, and is increasingly a part of right-wing conservative as well as populist discourse (Kováts, 2018). Furthermore, it is not only in Sweden that public service and mainstream commercial news media are written off by many as left-wing propaganda channels, this thought resonates through slogans like “Lügenpresse” in Germany and “Fake-news” in the US. In the UK, the former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, has often made a similar case about the BBC and other mainstream media channels. In France, the concept of “Réinformation” has been introduced through alternative media, such as *Novopress*, *Boulevard Voltaire* and *Réinformation TV*, as a strategy of “re-informing” those who, according to them, have been “misinformed” or even “desinformed” by the mainstream media.

The education sector and the universities are also facing these accusations. In Brazil, an important part of Jair Bolsonaro’s campaign was the promise to fight the ongoing ideological indoctrination of children in the schools (Romancini & Castilho, 2019). The academic world in general and the humanities and social sciences in particular are in many countries likewise perceived more as breeding grounds for ideas that compete with each other about being most radical and ideologically correct at the same time, rather than as places where it is possible to pursue wisdom and knowledge freely, without the risk of being punished for arriving at the “wrong” conclusions.

What all these things have in common is the idea that the major cultural institutions in society are – in part or wholly – dominated by perspectives that promote left-wing and/or progressive liberal agendas in an oppressing manner that cracks down hard on any dissent, especially through mechanisms of exclusion, such as labelling critics in a way that stigmatizes them (for example, as “xenophobes,” “homophobes” and “misogynists”), not allowing controversial speakers to appear at campuses and other forms of actions that are directed at the individual’s possibility of making a living (the risk of losing one’s job). This is perhaps most prominently visible in the so-called Intellectual Dark Web (Weiss, 2018). This has become an umbrella term for a quite varied group of debaters, academics and intellectuals who primarily seek audiences through social media channels. Figures as diverse as the

evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein, neuroscientist Sam Harris, the comedian Dave Rubin and psychology professor Jordan Peterson are often mentioned as part of this loosely organized network. What unites them is not primarily a common political or ideological agenda, but rather a sense that academic and intellectual freedom is seriously under threat because universities and the media are so influenced by left-wing identity politics and political correctness. Questions like problematic aspects of multiculturalism, the relationship between race and IQ and the fundamental differences between men and women are often pointed out as subjects that cannot be seriously discussed anymore within the realm of the mainstream cultural, political and academic institutions.

Another example of symbolic questions that many express frustration about right-wing alternative media is the “war on Christmas,” the changing of traditions in various places around Christmas or renaming of the holiday in order to accommodate groups who presumably could take offense with events with such clearly Christian background. In my view, it is important to keep this in mind when discussing alternative media, since it says something important about the way many people feel about the cultural and intellectual climate of today, they can be described as reactions against different perceived “deficits of the so-called progressive actors” (Kováts, 2018).

As a media scholar, it is not my job to say if those who feel the way I just described are right or wrong in their analysis. Personally, I agree with some of the views I come across in my empirical material and disagree with other things. But my professional aim is to try and understand how their acts of expressing these views through media affect the surrounding media landscape, and as a consequence, society as a whole. News outlets like *Breitbart News* in the US, *Fria Tider* in Sweden and *Junge Freiheit* in Germany are very interesting as media phenomena, and studying them can tell us much about the present world of media as a whole. In order to do that, it is also necessary to understand why people choose to dedicate time to express such views publicly, what it means to them, what it means to their audiences and how it relates to the larger picture of other media channels in society. In my view, this is important to point out and as you will see later in this book, I argue that one of the problems in research about alternative media hitherto has been an unfortunate tendency to assume normatively determined qualities of “good” and “bad” about specific types of alternative media and to analyse cases accordingly. If alternative media (of any persuasion) is good or bad is to me a secondary question, the primary reason why they are interesting is simply because they exist, have an audience and are meaningful in many people’s lives.

Right-wing?

I have been reluctant to use the phrase “right-wing.” This is because it is a somewhat misleading and at times confusing label. As sociologists Kathleen M. Blee and Kimberly A. Creasap put it: “There is little uniformity in how scholars characterize the right in modern Western societies” (Blee & Creasap, 2010, p. 270). They also point out an important observation that right-wing movements are usually “known for what they are against, not for what they support” (p. 272), a point often also made elegantly many times by conservative philosopher Sir Roger Scruton about conservatism (Scruton, 2002). The pro-life movement, for example, is usually counted as a right-wing movement, but it arose as a response to the emergence of legal abortions and the violation of the sanctity of life that was sanctioned by this. Sometimes, “right-wing” is used about groups that cannot be called merely conservative, but are, so to speak further to the right and therefore carry connotations of extremism (Blee & Creasap, 2010). As such, it is also clearly and outspokenly something that many scholars who have studied it deem negative and that needs to be countered. In an anthology about “Right-wing women,” for example, the editors start by stating: “We hope this book contributes to increased understandings of and debates on the scope and importance of right-wing women and furthers anti-right-wing practice” (Bacchetta & Power, 2003, p. 1), an attitude that is, it can be argued, questionable from an academic perspective, but nevertheless widespread. Other times, right-wing implies a much broader spectrum and simply means any position that opposes “progressive” liberal or left-wing positions such as gender ideology and high taxes to fund public spending on social causes.

What complicates things even more is that even if we construe right-wing as a position that is to be defined according to what it is against (as implied above), they might be very much against other phenomena that are also considered right-wing. For example, it is clear that the alternative media that we are talking about here often are critical of groups and people who traditionally would be assumed as representatives of the more moderate political “right.” Populists, as well as many alternative media, target the global capitalist elites, and there are many expressions of frustration with the apparent weakness of more traditional mainstream conservative movements, like the Republican party in the US (the insult “Cuckservative” is a much debated example of this, see Rappoport, 2015).

Paternotte and Kuhar highlight this tendency and cautions against lumping together:

... phenomena as diverse as populism, far right parties, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism, neoliberalism or austerity politics. These are often gathered under the broad umbrella term of ‘Global Right’, which identifies right-wing actors in opposition to the advocates of progressive causes.

(Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 7)

The authors make an important point about the study of such counter movements that is similar to the one I am trying to make in this book about alternative media, and they should get credit for it. Scholars, they argue,

... should rather engage, (...), with the complexity of these oppositional dynamics and be careful about the concepts they use. This implies fine-grained theoretical and empirical work to better understand what is exactly at stake, as well as meticulous comparative research not to overstate what could be context-specific.

(p. 17)

This imperative is commendable, but it also highlights the sometimes very difficult task of being nuanced and context-sensitive, while at the same time trying to say something that will be of relevance even outside of specific contexts. In order to point out that there are indeed differences among the various positions that are included a bit sloppily under the term the “global right,” you still need to invoke the notion of the global right. And this is precisely what I mean when I talk about “right-wing” alternative media. The way I see it, the label right-wing can be used as an umbrella term – so long as it is acknowledged as such, and that there is a clear realization that the more extreme variants that might be squeezed in under that umbrella are not used to smear the others that are also standing under it. One of the best attempts to summarize what the conflicts between left and right are about is the way it is put by Wesley McDonald in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*:

For nearly two centuries, these competing groups battled each other mostly over questions of economics and class. The Right defended the propertied interests of the privileged classes while the

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Left sought to equalize wealth and property. For the most part, they debated the extent to which wealth should be redistributed through government intervention. In the early-twenty-first century, cultural and social issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, secularism, and multiculturalism, have come to play a more dominant role in Left-Right political struggles.

(p. 248)

As a response to such a development, researchers in political science have proposed the additional notion of GAL/TAN – Green Alternative, Liberal vs. Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist (Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002). While being useful in the sense that it points out other dimensions than merely the difference in economic concerns, and points to other causes of division, like the climate, nationalism and traditional values, the right/left division remains a central division and one that is needed in order to make sense of contemporary politics (Jahn, 2011). Importantly, what, I think, makes this relevant to study is the very notion of “alternative” in combination with “right-wing” – an aspect that will be developed in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 I will discuss the problematic aspects of the expression “fake news” later in this book.
- 2 This phrase is used by journalist David Fuller in a YouTube documentary about the Intellectual Dark Web on his channel *Rebel Wisdom*.
- 3 The different parts of the different chapters therefore mainly represent ideas and findings that I have also presented in my previously published works.

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