



## User profiles for populist counter-media websites in Finland

Elina Noppari\*

Ilmari Hiltunen\*

Laura Ahva\*

Tampere University, Finland

### Abstract

This article examines the users of Finnish populist counter-media (PCM) websites with the aim of exploring their motives for consuming and engaging with populist online media content. The article is based on a qualitative analysis of 24 semi-structured, focused interviews. We conclude that consuming and engaging with populist counter-media content is typically motivated by scepticism and mistrust of legacy media journalism and aspirations of constructing and sharing representations and narratives that challenge those of the dominant public sphere. These efforts are often motivated by deeply held personal beliefs and political stances. Three user profiles are devised to illustrate different types of counter-media users: (1) system sceptics, who express all-encompassing societal mistrust; (2) agenda critics, who express politicised criticism towards media representations of selected themes; and (3) the casually discontent, who sporadically browse sites for alternative information and entertainment.

### Keywords

Counter-media, fake news, media mistrust, partisan media, populism, right-wing media

### Introduction

The rise of global right-wing populism, the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) and the US presidential election of 2016 ushered in a massive surge of public debate over the consequences of fake news in online news consumption (e.g. Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018; Silverman, 2016; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Simultaneously, concern has been growing over the proliferation of partisan media websites, such as Breitbart News Network in the United States, that are seen as the driving forces behind contemporary political polarisation (Faris et al., 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). These phenomena have often been lumped together to form a frame of the *post-truth* era, a threat narrative in which the erosion of truth and facts endangers the institution of journalism and the foundations of Western democracy (Vuorelma, 2017).

The post-truth narrative has been accompanied by moral concern over the audience's media literacy (Vuorelma, 2017). Within this narrative, media users who consume partisan online content have stereotypically been labelled as misguided and as having insufficient media literacy,

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\* Email: [elina.noppari@tuni.fi](mailto:elina.noppari@tuni.fi)

\* Email: [ilmari.hiltunen@tuni.fi](mailto:ilmari.hiltunen@tuni.fi)

\* Email: [laura.ahva@tuni.fi](mailto:laura.ahva@tuni.fi)

and the producers of this content have been portrayed as manipulators who are willing to use lies and deceit to advance their political agendas (e.g. boyd, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Proposed solutions typically have revolved around increased media literacy programs and a proliferation of expert fact checking. These solutions, as pointed out by boyd (2017), largely ignore 'the cultural context of information consumption'.

In addition, these characterisations and solutions are based largely on assumptions, as little empirical research has been done on the audience or producers of this type of partisan online media material. The participatory communication infrastructure within the contemporary hybrid media system has provided new kinds of possibilities to partake in creating, steering and manipulating information flows (Chadwick, 2017). This has made it easier for any online user to establish alternative media and news websites, and to access media material that can be used to construct and support various political and ideological positions. An interview-based study by Holt (2017) regarding the contributors to Swedish immigration-critical alternative media (ICAM) and a survey study by Rauch (2015) focusing on alternative media perceptions of hybrid audiences can be seen as the first attempts to construct an empirical understanding of the motivations for consuming and engaging with this type of media.

This article examines how and why Finnish users consume and engage with partisan online media content. Based on our previous content analysis (Noppiari & Hiltunen, 2018) and previous research on the Finnish sites (Ylä-Anttila, 2018), we propose a concept of *populist counter-media* to describe the newly emerged Finnish partisan websites. By conducting research among this user segment, we are aiming to fill the research gap left by previous studies and provide a more nuanced picture of the users' motives and intentions through analysing how they discursively construct and assess consuming and engaging with this type of media content. The outlook is descriptive-analytical. Instead of taking a normative stance, our aim is to determine and understand the motives of individuals engaged in this type of content consumption and production.

Our aims can be summarised in the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do the users consume or produce populist online counter-media content? What kind of motivations can be identified?

RQ2: How do the users view the relationship between legacy media journalism and populist counter-media?

RQ3: How do the users see the societal and political roles and significance of populist counter-media in Finland?

First, we outline the concept of populist counter-media, then we present the Finnish media environment and political context. This is followed by an introduction to our methodology and research sample and a summary of our findings, introducing three counter-media user profiles. This article contributes to the ongoing discussion of alternative media, online populism and fake news.

### **Background and terminology: Outlining populist counter-media**

Partisan online media and news websites can be categorised as a form of alternative media, a concept referring broadly to all forms of media that provide alternatives to the dominant discourse in the mainstream media (Atton, 2015; Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008); however, the concept is too broad to provide analytical clarity, so a more precise term is needed to pinpoint the specifics of the type of media on which this study focuses. Researchers have used multiple concepts to further describe and analytically separate different orientations and types of the newly emerged sites in various national contexts, such as user-generated hyper-partisan news (Bastos & Mercea, 2017) and hyper-partisan news outlets (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). When examining sites

with an explicit right-wing or anti-immigration focus, concepts such as ‘right-wing media’ (Faris et al., 2017), ‘alt-right media’ (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), ‘immigration critical alternative media’ (Holt, 2017) and ‘far-right alternative online media’ (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018) have been used. Finnish researchers previously have referred to the Finnish media websites as ‘countermedia’ (Ylä-Anttila, 2018) and ‘fake media’ (Haasio, Ojaranta & Mattila, 2017).

The Finnish sites share many similarities with Swedish ICAM-sites (Holt, 2017), characterised by their strong, confrontational opposition to the dominant interpretations circulating in the public sphere. The sites also circulate counter-discourses on specific issues, and aim to build a public around them. Holt’s (2017: 5–12) interviewees did not consider their outlets to be ‘alternative’ in the form of ‘an equivalent “interchangeable” alternative to the established journalistic media’, but rather as complementary media whose purpose was to oppose, challenge and offer alternatives to established media coverage and discussion within specific areas.

A few key differences between the Finnish and Swedish sites, however, rendered the concept of ICAM unsuitable for our study. First, while most of the Finnish sites have anti-immigration profiles, not all of them share this position, opting instead for leftist anti-establishment stances. Second, we found it problematic to describe the Finnish sites as purely alternative, as they are mainly reactive, relying heavily on reframing mainstream media content (Toivanen & Nelimarkka 2018).

Based on our previous content analysis of the most popular Finnish counter-media site, MV-lehti (roughly translates as WTF-magazine), and non-participant observation of three other counter-media sites and their social media communities (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018), we concluded that the stories typically were based on material extracted from legacy media news, other existing media sources and social media. The sites selected their stories carefully, however, to fit their ideological profiles and to communicate specific political narratives (see also Haller & Holt, 2018: 10–12; Holt, 2017: 11–12). The ideological profiles of these sites were diverse: MV-lehti was an anti-immigration, right-wing site with a strong anti-establishment sentiment; Oikea Media (The Right Media) was a conservative right-wing nationalist site with an anti-Islam stance and a backdrop of charismatic Christianity; Kansalainen (Citizen) was a nationalist and conservative site with an anti-immigration and anti-EU-focus; and Vastavalkea (Counterfire)<sup>1</sup> was a left-wing site criticising neoliberalism, economic elites and Western geopolitics.

With a focus on Finnish sites with anti-immigration profiles, Ylä-Anttila (2018: 357) describes their operating models as spreading politically charged news and sometimes intentionally blurring the lines between fact and fiction, but most often combining facts with rumours, cherry-picking, colouring and framing information to promote a radical anti-immigrant agenda. These production practices reflect online and remix cultures, where all available content is seen as raw material for reuse (e.g. Phillips, 2015).

For these reasons, we found the counter-media concept more feasible for describing the Finnish sites, as they aim at creating counter-publics by utilising mainstream content. Fraser (1992: 123) defines counter-publics as ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’. Warner (2002: 56–7) notes, however, that the counter-publics do not always have to be subordinate in relation to the dominant public sphere, but may acquire agency. Downey and Fenton (2003: 193–4) add that counter-publics do not simply exist independently from the dominant public sphere, but seek to actively challenge it. Fraser (1992: 124) raises another key point: such publics are not necessarily virtuous, as some are anti-democratic, and those with democratic intentions are not always able to function without their own modes of exclusion and marginalisation.

After analysing the political discourse and rhetoric on these sites more closely, we decided to add the epithet of *populism* to describe their communication practices. Based on our analysis

(Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018), the sites' political positions did not often correspond with traditional party-politics in Finland and were sometimes difficult to pinpoint accurately on the traditional left–right political continuum. Instead, they engaged in *reflexive politics*, endemic to an online communication environment. Instead of stemming from traditional party or class identities, reflexive politics is driven by issues, values and positions set by the participating actors themselves (Häyhtiö & Rinne, 2008). Selected issues and stances therefore become the focal points in all the decision-making of reflexive politics. Identification with issues, rather than formal affiliation with a single party or movement, provides the sites' flexibility and enables them to act as an umbrella under which different actors can convene.

Regardless of the political or ideological orientation, Finnish counter-media sites constructed an explicit separation between 'the elite' and 'the people' – ordinary Finnish citizens who were also invited along to contribute to the sites (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018). Discursively, the sites explicitly positioned themselves as representatives of 'the people' against the establishment and elites. In addition, they constructed out-groups, presented as threats to the well-being of ordinary citizens. On the right-wing-oriented sites, these 'others' were ethnic and religious minorities or political groups that supported liberal values and multiculturalism, while on the left-wing sites, the out-groups were supporters of financial neoliberalism and Western geopolitics. Hence the basic societal outlook of these sites was consistent with the minimal definition of *populism* as thin ideology, dividing society into two antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupted elite', and demanding that politics should represent the will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 149–50).

The concept of populism has been the subject of controversy, partly because of the debate about whether it should be understood as constituting a fully-fledged political ideology or a style of communication (e.g. Krämer, 2014; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). In this article, we understand populism as a particular mode of articulation (Laclau, 2005) and 'a discursive strategy that juxtaposes the virtuous populace with a corrupt elite' (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016: 1593–4). It can take different forms, from left wing to right wing, as the key element in populist discourse is an unfilled social demand neglected by those with power. Populist communication usually has been observed in relation to journalism, political parties, charismatic leaders and established political actors (see e.g. Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). However, in the hybrid media environment, media users can increasingly contribute to populist discourses; counter-media, discussion groups and online communities are some of the sites where populist protest is articulated today (cf. Das, 2018).

There are several reasons why populist discourse thrives even better in the counter-media environment than it does in legacy media journalism. Examining media populism, Krämer (2014) points out that, in order to gain populist appeal, legacy media has to make the audience forget its close links to the establishment and political elite. Furthermore, even the more populist forms of journalism follow various professional norms and news criteria, and they cannot publish a populist vision of politics in general (Krämer, 2014: 51) Here, counter-media have an advantage, as they do not have to follow commercial logic, journalistic conventions or ethical principles: they can be as radical and polemical as they wish. In addition, the production practices of the counter-media sites support the formation of 'the people' as the in-group and collective user identity. Yet the Finnish sites did not represent entirely open publishing or peer-production (Benkler, 2016), as they had a small cluster of core contributors who, besides producing material themselves, acted also as a sort of editorial team, making publication decisions over user-submitted content (Noppari & Hiltunen, 2018).

Consequently, to describe the newly emerged Finnish websites, we propose a concept of *populist counter-media* (PCM), defined as alternative media with reactive and confrontational stances towards the dominant public sphere, utilising ideological and stylistic elements of

populism. The sites fit the definition of counter-publics (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1992) and exhibit distinct characteristics of 'thin' populism and communicational elements of media populism (Krämer, 2014: 48–9). This concept is not bound to a particular political or ideological orientation, but can be used to describe media formed around any combination of politicised issues, reflecting the reactive nature of reflexive politics (Häyhtiö & Rinne, 2008). The concept can therefore be used flexibly to describe multiple forms of media that incorporate populist articulation and style, with the explicit objective of challenging the representations and definitions in the dominant public sphere within specific areas, and fostering a reactive counter-public.

### **Case selection: The Finnish media system and populist counter-media websites**

The Finnish media system offers an interesting setting for alternative media research. As a Nordic country, Finland has a multiparty political system and a democratic-corporatist media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), wherein the combination of strong journalistic professionalism and public service broadcasting traditionally has resulted in a very high public trust in journalism (Nord, 2008). In 2017, Finland had the highest overall public trust in the news of all the countries measured, with 62 per cent of the respondents stating that they 'can trust most news most of the time' (Reuters Institute, 2017: 20–1). Also noteworthy is the almost complete withering of politically affiliated newspapers. Finland has gradually been drifting towards a politically neutral press system since the 1960s, with all the major dailies declared independent (Nord, 2008: 102–3).

While the overall level of trust in the media has remained relatively high, the alternative media sphere in Finland has not traditionally been very active. During the last decade, however, online anti-immigration activism has strengthened, developing in the same way as observed by Holt (2017: 4) in Sweden. Since 2000, numerous blogs and discussion forums critical of immigration and the mainstream media's portrayal of issues related to immigration have been established in Finland, resulting in the formation of an online anti-immigration counter-public (Horsti & Nikunen, 2015: 493–5). As the 2015 European migrant crisis functioned as a catalyst when the majority of new PCM sites were established, the anti-immigration sites could tap into existing online and grassroots anti-immigration activism.

There are also empirical indications of growing media mistrust among some segments of the population of Finland. In a 2016 survey, 71 per cent of supporters of the populist Finns Party and 73 per cent of supporters of extra-parliamentary parties agreed that they had lost trust in the traditional media (Pitkänen, 2016). The Finns Party has publicly expressed mistrust in and criticism of legacy media outlets (Hatakka, Niemi & Välimäki, 2017). While this may be viewed as an expression of the populists' tendency to position themselves as outsiders to the establishment and blame the media for siding with the elite (Wodak, 2015), there are indications that negative immigration stances correlate with mistrust in legacy media outlets (e.g. Holt, 2017; Pitkänen, 2016). When surveyed, members of the Finns Party also expressed a significantly higher level of trust in the most well-known anti-immigration Finnish PCM site, *MV-lehti* (Koivula, Saarinen & Koironen, 2016).

### **Methods and research material**

Our research had an exploratory character, as it focused on user segments with little previous empirical research (Stebbins, 2001). As the objective was to provide a better understanding of individuals engaged with Finnish populist PCM websites, the study was conducted in the qualitative research tradition.

Our research material consists of 24 semi-structured, focused interviews with users who consumed and engaged with Finnish counter-media. Half of the interviewees (12 people) actively produced counter-media content or administered PCM sites themselves, while the other half (12 people) were followers and often active participants in sites' social media communities. It is

noteworthy that online counter-media production practices often dissolve the separation between the consumer and the producer of media content (cf. Bruns, 2005). The latter group of interviewees sometimes also participated in the production processes – for example, by suggesting topics or allowing their social media comments or blog posts to be republished on the sites. The interviews were inspired by previous qualitative audience research that mapped audiences' media use and experience profiles (e.g. Schröder & Phillips, 2005) and audiences' trust in the news (e.g. Coleman, Morrison & Anthony, 2012). Due to the novelty of the topic, however, the material was analysed by way of inductive qualitative categorising (Mayring, 2000).

The interviewees were recruited using a variety of non-probability sampling methods, including critical case sampling and snowball sampling (Marshall, 1996).<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted between November 2016 and March 2018, with sixteen of them conducted via phone or Skype and eight in person. Because the subject-matter was controversial, the interview material has been used anonymously. This was communicated to the interviewees in advance to combat social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985). The focused interviews were semi-structured, with interview guides, and divided into three broader themes (media usage and political orientation; consuming and engaging with counter-media; and perceptions of the relationship between counter-media and legacy media). The interviews each lasted on average 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Due to the sampling method and qualitative approach, the study sample should not be considered representative, but rather illustrative, which is also reflected in the reporting of the findings.

Our sample was demographically diverse: it included both highly and less educated individuals and ranged from well-off professionals to pensioned and unemployed persons. Both men and women were represented, but the most typical interviewee was male and aged 30–50 years. This heterogeneity might indicate that counter-media usage, at least on some level, transcends the traditional demographic variables or explanations that are often used to explain support for populism (e.g. Norris & Inglehart, 2016).

The interviewees' political views were also diverse. In our sample, the majority supported the populist Finns Party, but other parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties, from left to right, were also supported. Some expressed that no existing Finnish party represented their political beliefs. While some participated actively in parliamentary politics, others stated that they had completely lost their faith in representative democracy. A few were politically active in other ways – belonging, for example, to anti-immigration protest movements.

### **Three user profiles of populist counter-media**

The only overarching common features of all the interviewees were the central role of online media in their media usage and the evident critique of legacy media, elites and the establishment. This criticism can be described as media scepticism, defined by Tsifti (2003: 67) as 'a subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust towards the mainstream media', conveying mistrust of the way 'mainstream news institutions function in society'.

While this mistrust and media scepticism were the central findings in our study, we constructed three counter-media user profiles (Table 1) to further illustrate different attitudes and stances regarding both legacy media and PCM and their roles in society. The profiles should not be understood as representations of individual interviewees, nor as clearly fixed or mutually exclusive. Rather, they are compositions and serve as a vehicle for exemplifying different combinations of motivations, assessments and definitions provided by the interviewees.

The first profile consists of *system sceptics*, who expressed all-encompassing mistrust of the media but also of society, echoing strong feelings of social alienation. The second profile comprises *agenda critics*, who hold strong opinions and views of selected issues and often feel that journalism does not represent their views fairly because of the political and ideological agendas of the media. The

last category is for the *casually discontent* audience members, who criticise phenomena like tabloidisation and sensationalism, and the conduct of individual journalists.

**Table 1: User profiles of Finnish populist counter-media websites**

	System sceptics	Agenda critics	Casually discontent
<b>Journalism</b>	See journalism as a tool for economic and political elites to maintain their power and status quo. Deep system-level mistrust.	Believe 'media elites' have their own political and ideological agendas that are projected onto journalism.	Believe individual journalists cause biases in journalism. Criticise trends like tabloidisation and commercialisation of journalism.
<b>Role of counter-media</b>	Have strong ideological beliefs and even revolutionary hopes for counter-publics.	Believe that counter-media is needed to challenge journalism and diversify public discussion in Finland. See journalism as an instrument for societal change.	Do not see counter-media as an arena for serious societal struggle. Consume content for alternative or additional information, fun or curiosity.
<b>Commitment to counter-media</b>	Actively support counter-media sites but also increasingly use their own online channels, like YouTube, to promote their views.	Produce and/or share counter-media stories. Belong to the sites' social media groups.	Sporadically follow counter-media and may belong to their social media groups. May occasionally share stories or content such as memes.
<b>Approach to media content</b>	Most responsive to radical claims or online conspiracy theories.	Prone to hostile media perceptions. Often feel that media content is biased against their views and opinions.	Constant irony and savvy scepticism as a way to consume online content.
<b>Dialogue</b>	Unlikely to change their opinions. Do not seek and/or refuse dialogue with legacy media journalists.	Seek dialogue with journalism but on their own terms. Strive to gain a legitimate position in public discussion.	May participate in dialogue with journalists through news comments or social media, but do not actively seek it.

### ***System sceptics are societal outsiders***

The system sceptics expressed holistic mistrust of the establishment and society, echoing a traditional critique of media as an ideological tool for the political and economic elite (see, e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988), but also incorporating elements of conspiratorial thought similar to 'the paranoid style' described by Hofstadter (1966).

The system sceptics' critiques reflected their broad systemic-level suspicion that emphasised connections between the legacy media and the establishment, thus highlighting the media's role in upholding the status quo. Journalism was seen as reflecting the interests of corporate media owners, the ruling politicians or global corporations. These views mirror the societal analysis of classic populism as grounded in the radical distinction between the common people and the ruling elite. Besides siding with the elite on political issues, growing commercialisation and the proliferation of entertainment were seen as indications of elite media control. Trivial sensationalism was often considered a red herring, used to divert the attention of the audience from important political matters when needed. System sceptics were the most susceptible to

expressing large-scale conspiracy theories regarding the media, with one example illustrated in the following quote:

It is possible and likely that, let's say, intelligence agencies ... it looks probable that stories fed to the mainstream media mostly originate from sources like the CIA and such. It is not so simple that everything in the mainstream media is true, but there is also purposeful misinformation, and I would say that there is probably a lot of it. (Interview 8, translation by authors)

Some system sceptics had completely given up legacy media and instead relied only on PCM sites and other alternative online sources. Andrejevic (2013) attributed the declining trust in journalism and other traditional societal authorities to the over-supply of information endemic to the networked information age. The networked structure in itself encourages constant doubt: by following hyperlinks, the user ends up deeper and deeper in the vast network of different sources, each of which challenges or contradicts the previous one. This surge of alternative sources undermines the authority of institutions traditionally considered to be objective, such as science or journalism. According to Andrejevic, this over-supply of information produces ideological polarisation, as traditional authorities are challenged, facts and opinions are mixed and conspiracy theories become increasingly popular. In a media environment characterised by the over-supply of information, constant mistrust and doubt become the norm and are used to shift through the endless stream of content and information (see also Coleman, Morrison & Anthony, 2012: 50).

System sceptics felt most strongly that their views resided completely outside the dominant public sphere. They saw PCM sites as a way to construct and share material that could counter, challenge and bypass the ideological power of the mainstream media. System sceptics did not believe in dialogue or other collaborative possibilities with legacy media journalists, but instead focused on constructing competing counter-publics to rival their influence. In practice, this was often done, for example, by using sources that legacy media do not utilise. This position echoes the Gramscian counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream media, highlighting the revolutionary hopes involved in the production and consumption of PCM content (c.f. Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008: 16–20). In this project, the populist expression and stances were often seen as vehicles to get people interested in these matters, and to persuade them to question representations and definitions provided by legacy media. These strategies were seen to have at least symbolic revolutionary potential, as discussed in the following quote:

The political elite sees alternative media as a threat. And mainstream media also sees them as a threatening factor, because there are high-quality alternative media that speak the truth about a plethora of things. So they are seen as a threat, as they are diminishing the halo the mainstream media has had in people's eyes. (Interview 16, translation by authors)

### ***Agenda critics express politicised mistrust***

The second profile consists of agenda critics, whose media scepticism was more specified and focused on the media coverage of selected themes and issues. Unlike system sceptics, agenda critics saw legacy media as central and influential to their political and ideological aspirations, and their media scepticism could be characterised as highly politicised. Typically, agenda critics held strong opinions and views of particular issues, and often felt that their opinions and stances were not fairly or accurately represented in the dominant public sphere, frequently suggesting purposeful media biases. Agenda critics felt that their views were not given fair or legitimate attention in serious societal discussion within legacy media journalism.

The agenda critics identified media organisations as a primary source of bias. Here, editors and managers were seen as gatekeepers wielding media power as they liked, using it for their own political goals and unjustly silencing critical voices. The notion of the *hostile media phenomenon*



can offer a possible explanation for the media scepticism felt by the agenda critics and their engagement with PCM content. The hostile media phenomenon, first demonstrated by Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985), refers to the tendency for individuals with strong preconceived attitudes, partisanship and emotional involvement to perceive media material as unfairly biased and hostile to the position they advocate. In addition, hostile media perceptions and presumed media influence have been linked to increased expressive political behaviours and corrective action (e.g. Barnidge & Rojas, 2014), suggesting that people who experience media as biased are more prone to voice their opinions in the public sphere in an attempt to correct perceived wrongs. Our interviewees often expressed similar aspirations of ‘correcting’ and ‘pointing out’ biases in legacy media coverage, and described their efforts to engage in dialogue with journalists, often experienced as disappointing and fruitless.

For the agenda critics, the main reason to engage with PCM was to seek alternative views to legacy media coverage regarding themes considered biased and unisonous in the Finnish legacy media. Those users engaged with right-wing sites viewed the legacy media as representative of ‘liberal’, ‘leftist’ and ‘green’ values, and often turned to counter-media websites to consume and share content they considered ‘conservative’ and ‘nationalist’. Immigration, Islam, multiculturalism, and sexual or ethnic minorities were topics viewed as receiving biased coverage in the legacy media. This is similar to the critique in Sweden, where the contributors to ICAM sites saw the mainstream media as biased, especially regarding the media’s portrayal of immigrants and Islam (Holt, 2017). Concerning economic policy and European Union-related issues, legacy media journalism was often criticised for favouring the economic and political elites, especially by users who identified as leftist.

Agenda critics often described incidents where information provided by foreign media outlets or other users of social media had contradicted legacy media reporting, raising suspicions about the veracity of the material. This highlights the central role of peer networks for these users. For media users, the web environment provides a strong sense of authenticity to information that seems to originate directly from amateurs and peers (e.g. Coleman, Morrison & Anthony, 2015: 50). Reliance on peer networks can also be considered a response to the encumbrance that mistrust places on media users. The interviewees related that this mistrust made media use taxing for them. This burden was also one of the reasons the interviewees mentioned when explaining why most of the audience settled for information provided by legacy media. Despite the hard work required to find information from alternative sources and peer networks, the interviewees frequently implied that discovering content that challenged mainstream information was a rewarding experience.

Agenda critics viewed counter-media as an instrument to bring new opinions to the public discussion and force legacy media to consider them in their reporting. They often felt that PCM sites had already somewhat succeeded in extending the Finnish public sphere. The complementary position was evident when interviewees reflected on the relationship between PCM sites and legacy media, which was seen as a reactive two-way interaction, as illustrated by the following quote:

If it has become obvious for mainstream media that alternative media will publish something, and that has put them under pressure to react and report that issue in time, then I will say that [alternative media have] had an effect in my opinion ... if the mainstream media would fix itself sometime, then we would, in a way, lose our business; we would not have any purpose anymore. (Interview 19, translation by authors)

### ***The casually discontent rely on savvy scepticism***

The third profile consists of the casually discontent, whose media scepticism derives from multiple sources. They typically criticised trends like the tabloidisation and commercialisation of journalism, as well as the conduct of individual journalists. They often found legacy media

journalism unreliable and lacking in some respects, and turned to social media, online discussion forums and PCM sites to find more information about specific incidents and themes. Crime reporting in legacy media was especially seen as suffering from too-strict ethical guidelines and 'political correctness', which diminished the accuracy of the reporting, unjustly protected the perpetrators and obscured crimes committed by immigrants or members of the elite.

The casually discontent expressed a wide variety of motives for consuming PCM content; however, while the agenda critics and system sceptics placed high political, ideological and even revolutionary hopes on counter-media, the casually discontent typically did not. They were often motivated by a wish to discover additional or alternative information, but also by sheer curiosity or interest in 'extreme political thought'. They also mentioned enjoying the entertainment value, provocative writing and confrontational attitude towards legacy media and the establishment. Casually discontent users often expressed that counter-media content should be 'consumed in a proper way' – in other words, with the detached irony typical of online culture, where nothing should be taken too seriously or literally (Phillips, 2015).

The media scepticism of casually discontent users focused on journalists as individuals and attributed biased media content to factors such as work practices, educational background, values, political attitudes and journalists' intentions. They felt that legacy media journalism often worked against its own ideals when it churned out poorly sourced and sensationalist news, and used misleading headlines to capture audiences' attention online. Journalism was often seen as too soft on elites and politicians; however, this was not attributed to systemic or politicised mistrust, but rather to the individual journalists producing the material:

I would not explain any features of media content or their possible biases with top-down conspiracy theories ... In my opinion, media content is what it is because the journalists are what they are ... The prejudices that journalists have are reflected in the media content ... (Interview 9, translation by authors)

While critical of legacy media journalism, casually discontent users also expressed critical views of PCM sites, often considering them inaccurate and biased. Some parts of counter-media content were outright disregarded as 'nonsense'. The casually discontents' approach to all media content – especially online – has common features with savvy scepticism (Andrejevic, 2013): all media representations are seen as inherently suspicious. Simultaneously, savvy scepticism is characterised by the users' confidence in their own competence or intuition to determine the veracity of the content and seeing through the facades to real 'truths' and motives. This notion was evident in our interviewees' descriptions of how they estimated the trustworthiness of information:

It is similar when you read something from mainstream media; you don't have to believe everything ... Let's say that I read an article (from counter-media): there can be one accurate point and then five that are complete flim-flam, in my opinion. But I can ignore those five things and acknowledge only the one point from the article. You do not have to turn down the whole story because of the flim-flam in between while it also contains kernels of truth ... (Interview 12, translation by authors)

The idea of savvy scepticism is also in line with previous studies of active internet users in Finland, who do not consider the information provided by legacy media to automatically be more trustworthy compared with online sources (Noppari, 2013: 71). Our interviewees described consuming and comparing material produced by legacy media, social media and counter-media sources without considering any of them as having an authoritative position. When determining the trustworthiness of information, it was the content itself, rather than the author or source, that was considered the most important factor.

## **Results and discussion**

The three user profiles we have presented in this article highlight vastly different motivations for Finnish users engaging with populist counter-media websites. The results illustrate that the appeal of this type of partisan online content can be explained by divergent factors among different user groups. This suggests that, instead of simply attributing the proliferation of partisan online media content to post-truth or insufficient media literacy, multiple developments, including technological-, cultural-, social-, political- and individual-level phenomena, should be examined in tandem to account for the emergence and popularity of PCM websites.

All the user profiles highlight the growing importance of the affective choices made by individual actors in the current high-choice hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2017). Our research concludes that the users did not engage with PCM content because they could not distinguish it from legacy media journalism or were unaware of its partisan nature (the media literacy approach); rather, they made active, affective and conscious choices to consume and engage with material that contradicted the agendas and views of the dominant public sphere and promoted strong ideological stances expressed via populist address. Andrejevic (2013) argues that, in an environment marked by an over-supply of information, the individual who decides what to consume and trust – and what not to – becomes the focal actor. Media are consumed very selectively and individually, and according to our interviews, this is especially true when it comes to various forms of online media content. As illustrated by the profiles, the hybrid media environment simultaneously provides new tools and possibilities for users to participate in media production and distribution, from sharing and commenting on content to producing and publishing it online (Das, 2018). Therefore, as well as consumption, these affective choices can more often also manifest as various ways of participating in the distribution and production of media material.

To a large degree, feeling marginalised or alienated by traditional media outlets was a key reason for media mistrust, as system sceptics and agenda critics especially positioned themselves in a subordinate public position. They perceived their views and opinions to be either not discussed in the dominant public sphere maintained by legacy media or presented in prejudiced or biased ways. The popularity of counter-media websites can be seen as one manifestation of how actors with issues and views considered unfit, difficult or detestable by the dominant public sphere are able to produce their own public spheres elsewhere.

Eroding trust in legacy media journalism and other traditional societal institutions can be viewed as another symptom of this development, and our findings illustrate that even Nordic countries characterised by high societal trust are not immune to this type of effect. Some features in the Finnish media system may even encourage the establishment of counter-publics. Democratic-corporatist media systems often feature an underlying tendency of societal and political consensus, and these efforts typically have been supported by legacy media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 50–3, 183–97). Similarly to Holt's (2017: 9–10) observations in Sweden, the perceived 'corridor of opinion' and lack of certain news and perspective in legacy media may create readily available niches for different types of alternative media.

Although Finland's combination of relatively high trust in legacy media journalism and the neutral press system can be considered an outlier even among Western democratic countries, the media scepticism and mistrust felt by individuals engaged with PCM sites can be seen as one indicator of deeper underlying changes in the media culture. The question of mistrust is not limited to PCM site users, but includes regular news users as well (Coleman et al., 2012), and general media audiences in Finland have expressed similar journalism criticism in previous studies (e.g. Heikkilä, Ahva & Siljamäki, 2012). Declining public trust in journalism as an authority may have significant societal consequences, especially as many accounts indicate multiple connections between a deteriorating trust in journalism and an increasing lack of confidence in

established political systems and other societal institutions (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen & Steindl, 2018; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2013).

We therefore suggest that attention should be shifted from problematic concepts of truth and veracity dominating the post-truth framing to the ways in which trust and mistrust in media content are constructed and negotiated among different audience groups. This is essential for media scholars looking to better understand how people navigate and assess information in complex, high-choice hybrid media ecosystems, but also increasingly to political scientists trying to grasp how trust and mistrust are used to mobilise the ideological and stylistic elements of populism utilised by various actors in the contemporary media environment.

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## Notes

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- 1 Not to be confused with another website called [www.counterfire.org](http://www.counterfire.org).
- 2 Finding interviewees was laborious, as several of the sites operate anonymously or under pseudonyms, and the contributors were often unresponsive to our contact efforts or suspicious of our motives. We approached several sites or contributors directly via email or other communication channels, with moderate success, and managed to get in contact with some interviewees by utilising our social contacts. In addition, we were often able to convince the previous interviewees to introduce us to their contacts and acquaintances, effectively starting the snowball sampling process.