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Alternative to what?: a faltering alternative-as-independent media

Scott A Eldridge II

The promise of alternative media is found in their independent, adversarial voice. What happens when that voice changes?

When discussing alternative media, the proposition has been a straightforward one: Alternative media are politically-outspoken, doing little to disguise their subjectivity. They are also ardently independent, seeing themselves as adversaries of traditional media. Particularly online, alternative media and their journalists see theirs as a better version of the news, free from the corporate pressures and proximity to power they say is corrupting establishment political journalism. These media, normally, push back on those in power – across all sorts of ways of understanding it – and see traditional media among those in power.

But is this still the case? At the close of 2020 campaign, it's this alternative-as-independent voice that appears to be faltering, and perhaps more so on the right than the left, as the distance between alternative and traditional conservative media narrows.

An entrenched conservative ecosystem

A first sign of a blurring distinction between alternative and mainstream content emerges in the conservative alternative media coverage of the end of the 2020 campaign, quickly making common cause with their corporate media counterparts. [RedState](#) defended Fox News, attacking CNN's Jake Tapper for having "the actual chutzpah to try and dictate journalistic standards to a rival news network that CNN simply cannot touch". Elsewhere on [RedState](#), they attacked mainstream media through obsequious praise for Fox News' Tucker Carlson, who "points out in his typical excellent fashion how terrible our intellectual betters in the media are at their jobs." On that ground, this is familiar: alternative media attacking the mainstream. Indeed we expect partisan media to fire such pot shots, with MSNBC and CNN regular targets for right-wing sites like [PJ Media](#), and Fox News regularly called to task by left-wing sites like [Talking Points Memo](#).

Yet over and over, at the heart of much of this, is Tucker Carlson, who may be an arch-conservative, but certainly works for one of the largest media corporations. He is regularly treated as somehow 'outside' the corporate mainstream, lauded at [Breitbart](#) for "calling out" Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and elevated at [Daily Caller](#) (a site he co-founded) where a hypothetical Carlson 2024 presidential campaign is acknowledged. In praising Carlson, a link between the alternative right-wing media and the conservative corporate media is made stronger. And a healthy distinction between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' is weakened.

What do we see on the left at the same time? On blogs like *Talking Points Memo*, *Daily Kos*, and others, they certainly attack the conservative Fox News. But 'liberal' networks like MSNBC simply aren't given the same sort of unabashed support on the alternative left. Instead, they are regularly [criticized](#), for being more corporate, more traditional, and simply, less-alternative. [Daily Kos](#) describes cable news networks as "milking this moment of heightened attention [the end of the campaign] for all the ratings points and ad dollars they can rake in". On *Jezebel's* politics site 'The Slot', they list '[terrible tweets](#)' skewering political

commentators from both the left and right, including MSNBC, the never-Trump Lincoln Project, and Crooked Media founder (and former Obama speech writer) Jon Favreau.

In other words, from the alternative liberal media we see *both* predictable attacks on ideological enemies, and a willingness to critique ideological friends, including along alternative/mainstream distinctions.

Alternative to what?

At first glance, this signals a faltering alternative-independent voice among conservative alternative media. In substance, we see little distinction between their content and Fox News', in part, and between theirs and Tucker Carlson's, in particular.

It's fair to ask how much this abandonment of 'alternativeness' among the right also reflects an ideological moment. The tie that binds seems to be an unflinching allegiance to Trump, in a further calcification of the conservative media ecosystem [Robert Faris and colleagues](#) identified in 2016. Conservative alternative media could be propping up other conservative media like the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, or *Fox News* to reinforce Trump's all-out assault on news media that critique him ([and lambast them when they don't](#)). It is also fair to wonder whether we'll see a similar left-ward dynamic as Biden enters the White House (though the [residue of progressive-centrist](#) primary battles suggests this is unlikely).

What remains striking is not the ideological fraternity of right-wing voices, but the degree to which 'alternativeness' has been lost. Setting aside a cynical conclusion that like-minded media would naturally reinforce each other, these shifts suggest a more fractured media ecosystem where conservative media, whether alternative or traditional, operate according to their own logics.

There is a compelling argument that a pluralistic and heterogeneous media system composed of both mainstream and alternative voices is a boon to democracies. Disagreement between media can foster better journalism as a check on complacency and offer a wider public more opportunities for news content. But now? This pluralism is less apparent, and given conservative alternative media's allegiance to both the sitting president and one of the largest corporate news companies, it certainly raises the question: Alternative to what?