

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rdij20>

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To cite this article: Rainer Freudenthaler & Hartmut Wessler (2022): How Alternative Are Alternative Media? Analyzing Speaker and Topic Diversity in Mainstream and Alternative Online Outlets, Digital Journalism, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2022.2117715](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2117715)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2117715>



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How Alternative Are Alternative Media? Analyzing Speaker and Topic Diversity in Mainstream and Alternative Online Outlets

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ABSTRACT


Alternative outlets can differ in their degree of partisanship, activism, and their opposition to a perceived news “mainstream.” We expect this could lead to diverging contributions to overall news diversity. We assess how mainstream-like, partisan and activist media differ from mainstream reporting concerning migration and refugee policy in Germany. We combine a manual analysis of speaker diversity in 12 mainstream and alternative outlets ($N = 1,172$ articles) with a computational topic model ($N = 34,819$ articles) covering 30 outlets to assess topic diversity. Interestingly, we find no significant differences between mainstream and alternative outlets regarding overall speaker diversity. But our data show differences in which parties get cited, and whether outlets focus on experts, civil society speakers, or migrants themselves. While mainstream media offer higher overall topic diversity, alternative media split along the lines of agenda accommodation and more independent agendas of partisan and activist media.

KEYWORDS

Content diversity; actor diversity; quantitative content analysis; automated content analysis; alternative media; topic modelling

The advent of online media is offering consumers a larger diversity of mainstream and alternative sources (Van Aelst et al. 2017). While legacy news media that emerged before the advent of online news still guide the news agenda (Langer and Gruber 2021), they face increased commercial pressures that negatively affect news diversity (Tiffen et al. 2014). But these developments vary, depending on country-level factors (Humprecht and Esser 2018) and shaped by the organizational environment of outlets (Boczkowski 2010; Hendrickx 2020). On the other hand, emerging technologies promise lower entry barriers for content production by emerging actors, which aim to amplify voices not previously heard within the public sphere (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Alternative media aim to steer attention towards issues they feel underrepresented (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019), activist media aim to mobilize citizens to engage with civil society (Waltz 2005), and a growing environment of partisan media aims to mobilize support for political actors (Rae 2021).

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2117715>

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The aim of this article will be to investigate the very diverse contributions of alternative media, ranging from mainstream-like to partisan and activist. While we already know that alternative media vary in how they are organized and portray themselves to readers (Heft et al. 2021), we aim to investigate (1) *how alternative media overall differ from mainstream reporting* and (2) *how different types of alternative media (activist, mainstream-like, and partisan) vary in what they contribute, both in who gets to talk within these outlets and which topics are covered*.

These questions are particularly salient with regards to controversial political topics. We will focus on migration and refugee news coverage, as it has often been used as an exemplary case for measuring diversity in the news (Benson 2009; Masini et al. 2018; Buyens and Van Aelst 2022) and since it attracts particular attention both within right-wing alternative media (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) and pro-refugee activist groups (Crepaz 2022).

Migration and Refugee News Coverage

Migration and refugee news coverage has attracted attention within journalism research in recent years: We know that prominent news frames focus on economic, cultural, and security perspectives on one hand and victim and hero frames on the other, portraying the hardships that migrants and refugees face or positive examples of successful integration (Eberl et al. 2018). Reporting appears to primarily focus on refugee migration compared to labor migration (Strömbäck, Andersson, and Nedlund 2017) and on the negative aspects of immigration, with cultural and security threats being emphasized in connection with migration from North-African countries (van der Linden and Jacobs 2017) and economic and security threats emphasized in connection with refugees (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017).

The overall negative portrayal of immigration might explain why issue salience alone can reinforce anti-immigrant sentiment (van Klingereren et al. 2015) and strengthen anti-immigration parties (Burscher, van Spanje, and de Vreese 2015). It has also led to a particular attention towards the topic within right-wing alternative news media (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) who are aiming to steer the news agenda towards the issue (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020).

This is particularly interesting in the German case, where news coverage of refugees in 2015 had a comparatively positive valence towards refugees (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2016) to the degree that mainstream journalism was criticized for following the government's "welcoming" message in a one-sided fashion (Haller 2017). This period could have aided the growth of a right-wing alternative media-sphere (Bachl 2018), which is not tied to the traditional conservative party, but a relatively new rightwing-populist AfD, leading to a populist media-sphere centered on this party (Heiss and Matthes 2020). Meanwhile, over time media coverage reverted to a more critical tone (Hemmelmann and Wegner 2016; Vollmer and Karakayali 2018), in part in response to mass reports of sexual assaults by refugee suspects on New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne. This shift mobilized pro-refugee activists and their media, which are more strongly grounded in civil society (Crepaz 2022).

Speaker and Content Diversity in Online News

When assessing the diversity of news coverage, researchers are usually interested in two dimensions: first, the diversity of speakers that are cited in the news, and second, the diversity of content, meaning the range of perspectives, opinions or topics covered. For the diversity of speakers, there are usually two standards of interest (Buyens and Van Aelst 2022): First, whether speakers of different fields in society – not just domestic political elites, but also the media, academia, civil society, or “regular citizens” – are represented (Masini et al. 2018; Benson 2009). Second, how diverse the speakers of political parties are – whether representatives of different political parties are represented within news coverage (Jacobi, Kleinen-von Königslöw, and Ruigrok 2016).

Speaker diversity appears to be shaped by the resources available to news outlets (Hendrickx 2020), the accessibility of sources, and the audience media cater to: A higher share of domestic political elites within news reporting rather than affected groups and regular citizens (Tiffen et al. 2014) appears to be common primarily due to the perceived trustworthiness of official sources and their accessibility (Gemi, Ulasiek, and Triandafyllidou 2013). But the orientation towards an audience high in cultural capital positively affects speaker diversity, with national quality news outlets showing higher diversity than niche outlets and tabloids (Masini et al. 2018; Benson 2009).

Regarding content diversity, we find a broad range of operationalizations within the literature (Eberl et al. 2018). One strand of research focuses on frame diversity within news (Benson 2009), or the valence pro and contra immigration (Masini et al. 2018) to capture ideological diversity. Meanwhile, methods aimed to capture the topical orientation of outlets focus on which different issues online media focus on (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020, Mayerhöffer 2021) to capture the topical breadth of reporting.

Studies into content diversity during past decades paint a complex picture (Van Aelst et al. 2017). On one hand, news markets are shaped by increased commercialization (McManus 2009) and trends towards concentration of media ownership (Vizcarrondo 2013). Some theorists bemoan a decrease of content diversity (Hendrickx 2020). Increased competition in online news also seems to have strengthened mutual co-orientation among journalists, leading to a homogenization of content (Boczkowski 2010; Tiffen et al. 2014).

At the same time, several factors appear to shape the degree of content diversity: Audiences higher in cultural capital prefer more diverse and information-rich sources (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2012), and the strength of public broadcasting within countries positively affects content diversity throughout all outlets (Humprecht and Esser 2018). But these differences vary based on the independence of public service broadcasters and the regulation of private outlets (Esser et al. 2012).

The Contributions of Mainstream and Alternative Online Media to Immigration Discourse

How do these factors apply to alternative media? The term “alternative media” covers a wide range of outlets which perceive themselves as correctives of a “mainstream”

(Holt 2018) and whose degree of alternativeness on different dimensions may vary (Heft et al. 2020). We will expand on previous research (Freudenthaler and Wessler, 2022), where we found large variance in the discursive functions that different left-wing and right-wing media serve compared to mainstream outlets: While *mainstream-like* outlets were found to be closer in style to mainstream outlets, with low degrees of moralization and incivility, *partisan* alternative media were observed to focus on group-centered cultural arguments and displayed high incivility. Lastly, *activist outlets* were found to advance moral and legal arguments with low levels of incivility. In this article, we will investigate if these differences in style are mirrored in the diversity of speakers and topics covered within these types of outlets:

The presence of *mainstream-like outlets* within alternative media reflect that the boundaries between alternative and respectable mainstream journalism are themselves in a constant process of renegotiation, with established journalists themselves drawing the boundaries of who counts as acceptable sources of news (Nygaard 2020), with journalists throughout their career crossing the boundary between alternative and mainstream journalism (Harcup 2005) and with audiences varying in their perception of who is “alternative” (Rauch 2015). Thus, more mainstream-like content might serve to bridge the gap between more fringe news outlets and established mainstream media (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020). Despite similarities in their content, these outlets are still identifiable as alternative due to their self-perception as a corrective of the “mainstream” (Holt 2018) and/or non-commercial, cooperative form of organization (Atton and Hamilton 2008).

In contrast to these more mainstream-like outlets we will on one hand distinguish *partisan* alternative media as outlets which serve polarized fringes of the political spectrum (Rae 2021) and might be part of a far-left or far-right media environment (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Bachl 2018).¹ We would expect these outlets to be more critical of mainstream reporting and to diverge more clearly from the mainstream news agenda (Mayerhöffer 2021).

Activist media, meanwhile, are grounded within civil society and emerge to support specific activist causes. Activist groups often aim for mainstream acceptance, making them less “alternative” in tone (Waltz 2005, S. 17-19), but potentially more thematically focused.

Lastly, alternative media can be distinguished along their ideological orientation: Buyens and Van Aelst (2022) are able to show there are distinct differences between Flemish left-wing and right-wing alternative media, with the former focusing more strongly on civil society actors, while the latter have a very similar profile to professional news media, but a larger focus on right-wing parties.

Underlying these categories are dimensions of alternativeness that can vary widely: Alternative media can vary in their opposition to a hegemonic news agenda (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019) and their giving voice to sociostructurally marginalized groups within society (Larson and McHendry 2019). They might also be identified by a non-commercial form of organization (Heft et al. 2020; Atton and Hamilton 2008) or participatory democratic aspirations (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Harcup 2011). But these dimensions do not necessarily coincide: Right-wing networks might not be hegemonic, but their constituents are not sociostructurally marginalized either (Larson and

McHendry 2019). Meanwhile, non-commercial media can be comparatively established actors within their market, and commercial media with broad appeal can be perceived as “alternative” by their audience (Rauch 2015).

With that in mind we will assess the contributions of alternative media, compared to mainstream media, regarding speaker and content diversity.

Regarding overall speaker diversity, we would expect that the same resource scarcity that affects mainstream journalism (Tiffen et al. 2014) is particularly limiting for alternative outlets, which suffer from lower levels of funding (Atton and Hamilton 2008) and cater to a politically more homogenous audience (Waltz 2005). We therefore expect the strength of mainstream media to lie in their breadth of voices they have access to (Gemi, Ulasiuk, and Triandafyllidou 2013):

H1: Mainstream media display higher levels of overall speaker diversity than alternative media.

We would expect the strength of alternative media, meanwhile, in amplifying *specific* actor groups that they feel are underrepresented within mainstream reporting. Activist outlets (Waltz 2005) and outlets with participatory democratic ideals (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Harcup 2011) could be expected to highlight civil society actors and affected groups themselves, countering their lower accessibility for mainstream journalism (Gemi, Ulasiuk, and Triandafyllidou 2013). At the same time, it has been found that this is mainly the case for outlets on the left (Buyens and Van Aelst 2022). Therefore, we ask:

RQ1: Do alternative media focus on actors outside of domestic political elites and public administration sources that are underrepresented within mainstream media? How does this relate to media type (mainstream-like, partisan, or activist) and political orientation (left or right)?

Regarding domestic political elites, we would expect a relatively broad range of speakers within German mainstream media (Humprecht and Esser 2018; Masini et al. 2018), with shares proportional to their vote share in elections, because the resources available to parties to attract media attention is usually proportional to their political strength (Jacobi, Kleinen-von Königslöw, and Ruigrok 2016):

RQ2: Is the range of political party actors cited within German mainstream online news more diverse than in alternative outlets?

RQ3: Are party actors cited in proportion to their strength in the last election within mainstream and alternative media?

Alternative media, *especially partisan media* (Rae 2021), meanwhile, could supplement this by focusing on fringe political parties which receive less coverage (Buyens and Van Aelst 2022):

RQ4: Do alternative (mainstream-like, partisan, and activist) media focus on political party actors that are underrepresented in mainstream media?

As for topic diversity, there are two reasons to expect lower content diversity to varying degrees: First, as already mentioned, resource constraints (Atton and Hamilton 2008) and a homogenous audience (Waltz 2005) should affect the diversity of topics these outlets are able to cover and which topics their audience is interested in.

Second, we would expect alternative media to engage in agenda-setting, focusing on a narrower set of topics to steer the conversation (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019).

Therefore, we expect:

H2: Mainstream media display greater topic diversity than alternative media.

At the same time, we do not expect alternative media to be uniform: Mayerhöffer (2021) and Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa (2020) found alternative media to differ in how much they stray from mainstream reporting. Similarly, Freudenthaler and Wessler (2022) observed differences in the tone of reporting of outlets that could indicate differences in their topical broadness. We expect these differences in content to be related to whether they aim to appear more mainstream-like or partisan (Heft et al. 2020), or whether their reporting is grounded in civil society activism (Waltz 2005). We therefore ask:

RQ5: Do alternative media actively participate in agenda-building, or do they focus on the same topics as mainstream news? When alternative media diverge from mainstream news, how do these topical strategies relate to media type (mainstream-like, partisan, or activist)?

Method

Measuring Speaker and Topic Diversity

To measure the diverse contributions of different types of alternative media, in this article we will combine the advantages of two quantitative content analytical methods while acknowledging the limitations of said methods.

We use manual quantitative content analysis to measure speaker diversity within our sample. Due to the resource intensive nature of this method, it is usually applied to a smaller sample of outlets (compared with automated methods), necessitating selectivity (Neuendorff 2017). We will delineate how we arrived at the outlets for this part of the analysis below. Manual content analysis has the advantage of using theoretically derived categories to measure the occurrence of broad speaker categories within our sample, with categories often applied within news research (Buyens and Van Aelst 2022; Masini et al. 2018; Benson 2009), increasing both comparability and interpretability of results with related research, but limiting generalizability of findings – since we don't assess the whole breadth of outlets we found.

Topic modelling was chosen as a measure for content diversity. While this method is increasingly used within online news research (Maier et al. 2018; Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020), it brings disadvantages: With categories derived inductively it is telling us more about topical trends than ideological diversity. It also tells us more about the sub-topics within refugee and immigration news covered and less about the valence and evaluation of the topics mentioned, which frame-analysis would cover (Baden and Springer 2017). At the same time, it allows for a far broader picture of the whole output of a far larger number of outlets and allows us to group outlets together based on the topics found within them. This makes it a tool suited for the breadth of alternative outlets we seek to investigate.

Sample

To assess the source and topic diversity in outlets reporting on refugee policy in Germany, we scraped the RSS feeds of 30 exemplary mainstream and alternative online news outlets over a period of one year, starting April 10, 2017, and ending April 10, 2018. In the period covered, a national election took place in Germany on September 24, 2017, so that our data covers the debate during the pre-election phase, in which refugee policy loomed large, as well as during the subsequent coalition talks.

Our sample covers the same range of mainstream and alternative outlets as covered in Freudenthaler and Wessler (2022), which were chosen based on their audience reach as measured by market research, their reach on social media overall, and within Facebook groups discussing refugee policy.

For *mainstream* journalistic outlets we chose the conservative outlets Welt, FAZ and Focus and the progressive Spiegel, Sueddeutsche and Zeit. We included the two largest online tabloids Bild and t-online, and a broad range of regional outlets (DerWesten, LVZ, Merkur, Tagesspiegel, and Tag24) that offer insights into the topical contribution of regional news. Tagesthemen.de was added to allow comparison with online news by public broadcasting. For manual coding, we chose to focus on the four largest professional online outlets (Focus, Spiegel, Sueddeutsche and FAZ) and the tabloid Bild.de, which are often chosen as representative for the broader spectrum of reporting (Humprecht and Esser 2018).

For right-leaning *mainstream-like outlets*, we included Russia Today (RTdeutsch), a branch of Russian state television that brands itself as a counter-public outlet within the German public (Russia Today 2021) and appears to focus on stories aimed at fostering discontent in Germany-speaking countries (Elswah and Howard 2020)², and Epoch Times, an online news outlet whose parent company was founded by Chinese-Americans that plays an important role within the right-wing alternative media sphere (Bachl 2018), as well as Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten and Junge Freiheit. For left-leaning *mainstream-like outlets*, Neues Deutschland and Taz were chosen, who are both run non-commercially, with the former having strong ties to the established party The Left, having emerged from the East German state press. For manual coding, we analyzed RTdeutsch and Epoch Times, the two largest outlets within that group on the right, and Neues Deutschland on the left.

For *partisan* outlets we chose PI-News, Compact, Contra Magazin, Achse des Guten, Tichy's Einblick, and Ein Prozent on the right and KlasseGegenKlasse on the left. For manual coding, the outlets PI-News and Compact were chosen due to their prominence within anti-refugee groups (Freudenthaler and Wessler 2022), while KlasseGegenKlasse was chosen as representative for partisan left-wing outlets.

For *activist media*, Pro Asyl, SeaWatch and Amnesty International were included, with Pro Asyl being chosen as representative for manual coding, since it was the main activist source within pro-refugee groups.³

As noted in Freudenthaler and Wessler (2022), our analysis of facebookgroups found that contra-refugee sites relied to a far greater degree on alternative media than pro-refugee sites. Consequently, for our sample, we found more exemplary pages for partisan and mainstream-like alternative pages on the right. Meanwhile, pro-refugee groups

relied more heavily on activist media, which is why we included them for left-wing media in this article.

We downloaded 1,001,719 articles over all outlets for the sampling period. Since we were interested in articles covering migration and refugee policy, we applied manually validated keywords, a method commonly applied when sampling articles on immigration news (Eberl et al. 2018).⁴ Articles were included if they mentioned at least two of the keywords and the distance of those keywords covered at least a quarter of the overall length of the article. This led to a sample of 34,819 articles.

For human coding, we drew a random subsample of 100 articles for each of the 12 outlets. Since ProAsyl published only 72 articles in that period, we coded the full sample of this outlet.

Coding of Speakers

To measure which actors are cited, four student coders were advised to identify direct or indirect speech within each text. Occurrence of speakers was coded at the article level. Coders were trained extensively, and ambiguities in the codebook were discussed and clarified during the training process. During the final coding process, coders also coded a sub-sample of 120 articles to test intercoder reliability.

We used a version of the categories regularly employed for coding speaker occurrence (Van Aelst et al. 2017; Masini et al. 2018), simplified to increase intercoder reliability: We differentiated five main categories of speakers: domestic political elites and public administration, foreign politicians, experts and professionals, interest groups, and citizens. Within the category of domestic political elites and public administration, we distinguished between party speakers, for which we coded party membership⁵, and public administration officials (consisting of administration officials, judiciary speakers, and police, who all speak as representatives of administrative or judicial authorities). Foreign politicians were differentiated from national political actors following the assumption that their presence introduces diverging national perspectives (Masini et al. 2018). This category was further differentiated based on whether they were speaking for EU institutions, EU-member states, or non-EU countries. Experts and professionals⁶ were further divided into media actors and academics. Citizens contained the sub-categories regular citizen and migrant/refugee, for people who were identified as such within the reporting. See Appendix A, [supplementary materials](#), for the codebook used by the coders.

Intercoder reliability for all categories was at or above a Krippendorff's Alpha of .70, so that they are suited for drawing tentative conclusions from our results (Neuendorff 2017, 168), while we reached intercoder reliability ranging between .77 and .89 for the five main categories (see [Table 1](#)).

To test our hypothesis regarding speaker diversity, we computed Simpson's Diversity Index (D_z) on the outlet level (Masini et al. 2018; Buyens and Van Aelst 2022; McDonald and Dimmick 2003). This measure has the advantage of allowing comparison of distributions with different numbers of categories, since it standardizes against the number of categories. The D_z for a distribution is:

Table 1. Intercoder reliability for human coded articles.

Speaker type	Krippendorff's Alpha
Domestic political elites and public administration	0.80
CDU	0.84
CSU	0.79
SPD	0.83
Liberal	0.72
Greens	0.85
Left	0.80
AfD	0.87
Public administration	0.70
International political elites	0.89
EU politician	0.72
Politician EU member state	0.88
Non-EU politician	0.73
Professionals and experts	0.82
Media actors	0.82
Academia and experts	0.71
Interest groups	0.77
Citizens	0.80
German citizens	0.71
Immigrants/refugees	0.86

Intercoder reliability was measured on a sub-sample of 120 randomly selected articles coded by all four student-coders.

$$D_z = \frac{1 - \sum_1^k p_i^2}{1 - 1/k}$$

With p_i denoting the relative frequency of one given category i within the news coverage, and K denoting the total number of categories included. D_z can range from 0, denoting high concentration on one category, to 1, denoting that all categories are equally represented.

Topic Diversity

To assess topic diversity, we decided to use LDA topic modelling on all 34,819 articles. We followed the recommendations of Maier et al. (2018) by cleaning up our text corpus and removing text fragments that were not part of the article texts. We then continued with tokenization and transformation of all characters to lowercase, then removed punctuation and special characters and stop-words; then lemmatized the text and applied relative pruning by removing all words that occurred in less than 0.5% of articles or more than 99% of all articles.

Then we ran several topic models with varying numbers of topics K (20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70) and α -values (.005, .01, .05, .1, .2, .5, 1), with $\beta = 1/K$. We chose best model for each K regarding the mean intrinsic topic coherence for further investigation by two independent coders who used LDAvis and random samples of articles for each topic to qualitatively assess topic coherence. We found that the solution with 50 topics offered the most coherent set of distinct topics. It turned out that the model with $K = 50$, $\alpha = 0.005$, and $\beta = 1/K = .02$ best captures the distribution of topics in our sample. In the last step, we assessed randomly drawn articles for each topic that contained a specific topic with a probability of $> .5$ to investigate whether the topic was

semantically coherent and to label the topics. Using that method, we decided that 44 of our 50 topics were internally coherent. Following Maier et al. (2018), we grouped these topics together into topic groups: We performed a hierarchical cluster analysis based on the Hellinger distance⁷ between topics on the topic distribution to assess which topics often appeared in the same articles. Based on these clusters and a qualitative assessment of their fit, we grouped the topics into 11 topic groups. The content of all 44 topics is reported in Appendix B, [supplementary materials](#). The resulting topics cover a range of issues usually observed within immigration news studies (Eberl et al. 2018): We found topics relating to culture threat, economics, security (in the form of crime reporting) on one hand and humanitarian concerns relating to the hardship migrants face. Additionally, several topics appear to capture the political process, debates on asylum law and deportations, EU and US politics, and migration routes.

To assess the topic diversity within outlets, we again use Simpson's D_z , applied to the share of the 11 topic groups within each outlet's reporting as a measure for content diversity. We additionally performed a hierarchical cluster analysis on the outlets using the Hellinger distance between outlets over the topic distribution. Outlets that are grouped together, therefore, are more similar in their topical content. We then visualized the distribution of topic groups over all outlets in [Figure 1](#).

Results

Speaker Diversity in Mainstream and Alternative Outlets

Our first question was whether mainstream media portray a wider range of actors than alternative media (H1). [Table 2](#) displays the distribution of actors over the five main actor categories and their sub-categories and the resulting diversity index. Overall, we find similar patterns for mainstream and alternative outlets, with only the human rights outlet not having the largest focus on domestic political elites. Consequently, we do not find a significant difference between alternative and mainstream outlets overall ($t(8.52) = 0.128, p = .901$), with alternative media actually having a larger average degree of diversity ($M = 0.828, SD = 0.052$) than mainstream media ($M = 0.824, SD = 0.054$), albeit not to a significant degree. Our results therefore contradict Hypothesis 1.

Do alternative media ameliorate disproportionate representation of domestic political elites and public administration officials within professional journalistic media? And how does this relate to media type (RQ1)?

We do find that mainstream outlets focus mostly on domestic political elites and public administration officials, with shares ranging from 48.8 to 61.3%. At the same time, the tabloid bild.de contains the highest share of regular citizens – exceeding even all alternative news outlets in that category.

The more *mainstream-like right-wing* alternative outlets, meanwhile, show a larger focus on international actors. Since Epoch Times is part of an international network of alternative outlets, and since Russia Today is under editorial guidance of the Russian government (Elsawah and Howard 2020), this stronger international focus is unsurprising. They also display the lowest share of regular citizens cited, indicating that they do

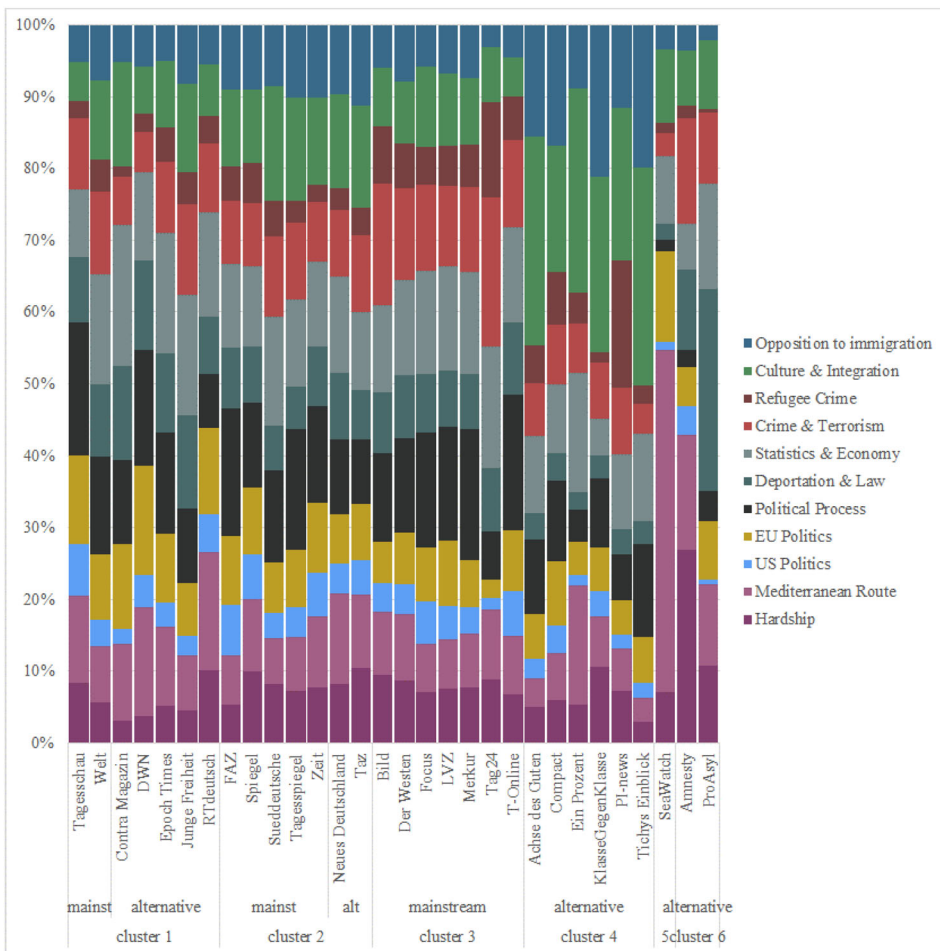


Figure 1. Distribution of topic groups over outlets. Topic groups were arrived at by combining individual topics into common clusters of topics that are related. Outlets with a similar content structure were grouped together using hierarchical cluster analysis. For description of individual topics, see Appendix B, [supplementary materials](#).

not have easy access to sources from within Germany. *Mainstream-like left-wing* Neues Deutschland, meanwhile, do cite a larger share of interest group actors.

We do find a larger focus on experts within *partisan right-wing* alternative media, and if we examine sub-categories, we find that this is due to an increased focus on media actors. This is in line with the observations of Buyens and Van Aelst (2022). We did observe during coding that when individuals who were both activists and producers of online media, these outlets would emphasize alternative journalistic identities over identifying actors as activists, which might indicate that the right-wing alternative media sphere is focused on legitimizing actors as seemingly more objective media producers rather than activists, in line with the role this right-wing media sphere plays for right-wing populist party's recruitment of voters (Bachl 2018). The *partisan left-wing* outlet KlasseGegenKlasse meanwhile contains the largest share of refugees and migrants.

Activist medium Pro Asyl, lastly, cites the largest share of interest groups – as it is rooted within civil society, it appears to have easier access to activist groups.

Looking at the speakers of political parties within these outlets, we find that mainstream news ($M = 0.914$, $SD = 0.072$) again do not differ significantly from alternative outlets ($M = 0.902$, $SD = 0.032$) in the diversity of actors cited ($t(8.79) = -0.387$, $p = .708$, RQ2). Table 3 displays the shares of party speakers across outlets and gives their share in the last election for comparison (RQ3). Overall, governing parties CDU/CSU and SPD received a disproportionate share of mainstream media's attention. At the same time, the regional CSU seems to benefit most. During coding, we observed CSU speakers were often chosen as representatives of contra-refugee positions, taking issue ownership from the far-right AfD. Again, the mainstream outlet faz.net appears to display the largest share of CDU speakers, which may be due to the outlet's conservative editorial line.

Do alternative media counter this disproportionate focus on governing parties (RQ4)?

For the *mainstream-like right-wing* media, we find that they do not differ much in their citation of political parties, while *left-wing* Neues Deutschland, which was still partially owned by the Left party (Karkowsky 2016), despite claims of editorial independence still seems to cite Left party speakers more often.

Partisan media on the right seem to counter the underrepresentation of AfD within mainstream media (see Table 3). Since both outlets were invited to the parliamentary AfD faction's "Conference for free media" (Eckert 2019), we interpret these results as indicating that these outlets have preferential access to AfD members. The *partisan left-wing* outlet KlasseGegenKlasse shows increased focus both on AfD and Left speakers.

Activist media, meanwhile, only cover speakers from the governing coalition, as we found that their reporting focuses on their legal and political conflicts with the current government.

Topic Diversity in Mainstream and Alternative Outlets

Next, we were interested in the contribution to topic diversity that different outlets offer (see Table 4). Here, we find that mainstream outlets appear to offer higher diversity: A *T*-test comparing the topic diversity of mainstream ($M = 0.974$, $SD = 0.007$) and alternative media outlets ($M = 0.942$, $SD = 0.044$) indicates significantly larger topic diversity in mainstream outlets ($t(15.95) = -2.795$, $p = .013$), which confirms Hypothesis 2.⁸

Finally, we investigated whether alternative media actively diverge from the mainstream news agenda and how their topical strategies relate to media type (RQ5). Therefore, we used cluster analysis to give us a further overview over the 30 outlets analyzed in this step. Figure 1 gives us an overview over the topics found in each outlet, sorted by clusters of outlets that were grouped together. We do find interesting patterns concerning the different contributions of alternative media outlets:

The *mainstream-like* outlets on the right - Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten, Contra Magazin, Junge Freiheit, Epoch Times and RTdeutsch are in the same cluster as Welt, a national mainstream outlet with a conservative bent, and tagesschau.de,

Table 3. Share of party speakers within outlets compared to vote share in last elections.

	Mainstream online outlets										alternative online outlets									
	National newspapers					Mainstream-like					Partisan					Left				
	FAZ	Focus	Spiegel	Sued-deutsche	Tabloid bild	Epoch Times	RT deutsch	Neues Deutschland	Compact	PI-News	Left Klasse Gegen Klasse	Right	Left Klasse Gegen Klasse	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right
CDU	41.0%	28.7%	25.0%	25.2%	28.6%	34.1%	33.3%	22.1%	36.6%	36.0%	18.9%	18.9%	44.4%	26.8%	34.1%	18.9%	18.9%	44.4%	26.8%	34.1%
CSU	20.5%	16.1%	20.7%	21.5%	20.4%	14.8%	15.4%	12.9%	8.0%	6.0%	14.9%	14.9%	22.2%	6.2%	7.4%	14.9%	14.9%	22.2%	6.2%	7.4%
SPD	13.5%	34.5%	19.6%	27.1%	27.6%	19.3%	24.4%	16.4%	17.0%	20.0%	20.3%	20.3%	33.3%	20.5%	25.7%	20.3%	20.3%	33.3%	20.5%	25.7%
FDP	5.8%	2.3%	9.8%	11.2%	4.1%	10.2%	6.4%	4.3%	2.7%	2.0%	1.4%	1.4%	0.0%	10.7%	4.8%	1.4%	1.4%	0.0%	10.7%	4.8%
Green	9.0%	6.9%	10.9%	8.4%	8.2%	11.4%	11.5%	9.3%	9.8%	10.0%	9.5%	9.5%	0.0%	8.9%	8.4%	9.5%	9.5%	0.0%	8.9%	8.4%
The Left	7.1%	4.6%	10.9%	4.7%	4.1%	5.7%	7.7%	27.9%	5.4%	6.0%	18.9%	18.9%	0.0%	9.2%	8.6%	18.9%	18.9%	0.0%	9.2%	8.6%
AfD	3.2%	6.9%	3.3%	1.9%	7.1%	4.5%	1.3%	7.1%	20.5%	20.0%	16.2%	16.2%	0.0%	12.6%	4.7%	16.2%	16.2%	0.0%	12.6%	4.7%
N	156	87	92	107	98	88	78	140	112	50	74	74	18			74	74	18		
Simpson's D_z	0.880	0.887	0.959	0.927	0.917	0.929	0.913	0.950	0.905	0.902	0.968	0.968	0.749			0.968	0.968	0.749		

Table 4. Clusters, outlet types, and topic diversity for 30 outlets.

Cluster	Outlet type	Outlet	Simpson's D_z (topic groups)	Rank		
Cluster 1	Mainstream	Tagesschau	0.960	19		
		Welt	0.978	6		
	Alternative (mainstream-like)	Contra Magazin	0.957	22		
		DWN	0.956	23		
		Epoch Times	0.973	13		
		Junge Freiheit	0.975	12		
Cluster 2	Mainstream	RTdeutsch	0.969	17		
		FAZ	0.971	15		
		Spiegel	0.983	2		
		Sueddeutsche	0.976	10		
		Zeit	0.977	7		
	Alternative (mainstream-like)	Tagesspiegel	0.973	14		
		Neues Deutschland	0.981	4		
		Taz	0.982	3		
		Cluster 3	Mainstream	Bild	0.981	5
				Focus	0.975	11
Der Westen	0.984			1		
LVZ	0.977			8		
Merkur	0.976			9		
Tag24	0.959			21		
Cluster 4	Alternative (partisan)	T-Online	0.968	18		
		Achse des Guten	0.932	25		
		Compact	0.969	16		
		Ein Prozent	0.925	28		
		KlasseGegenKlasse	0.936	24		
		PI-news	0.960	20		
		Tichys Einblick	0.907	29		
Cluster 5	Alternative (activist)	SeaWatch	0.799	30		
Cluster 6	Alternative (activist)	Amnesty	0.931	26		
		ProAsyl	0.930	27		

the online news of the national public broadcasting service, and display relatively high topic diversity and a rather even distribution of topics (Table 4). What seems to unite these outlets is a larger focus on topics concerned with the political process, government statistics and the economy, and debates concerning immigration law, and international and EU politics (Figure 1). The *mainstream-like* outlets on the left – Neues Deutschland and Taz – appear to have similar content structures as the mainstream outlets FAZ, Sueddeutsche, Spiegel or Zeit, the largest national professional outlets.

Regarding *partisan* media, we find that the partisan outlets on the right (Achse des Guten, Compact, Ein Prozent, PI-News and Tichy's Einblick) and the *partisan left-wing* KlasseGegenKlasse display a similar content structure (Figure 1) and lower degrees of topic diversity (Table 4). What distinguishes these outlets is a larger share of the topics relating to political movements opposing immigration and the debate of cultural compatibility and conflicts between the host culture and immigrants (Figure 1). This indicates two interesting points: First, it appears that partisan media on the left follow a similar topical agenda as right-wing outlets concerning immigration topics – which makes sense if these outlets aim to observe and counter the effects of far-right activism and talking-points. Second, partisan right-wing outlets' focus appears to be largely on cultural incompatibilities – surprisingly, we do not find a larger focus on the economic effects of migration, compared to mainstream news, and only in one outlet a larger focus on crime.

Activist media, lastly, appear to closely focus on topics relating to their organizations' work: Amnesty International largely focuses on the hardship refugees face, while ProAsyl focuses on the debate concerning deportations and law, and SeaWatch mostly reports on their own activism in the Mediterranean Sea.

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent technological and social developments have threatened mainstream news' ability to provide high-quality news which give room for diverse voices and topics (Tiffen et al. 2014). While users of online news today have more choice in which news they consume, paradoxically this same diversification appears to introduce increased pressures towards more homogenous news (Boczkowski 2010).

Alternative outlets promise to counter these developments: By positioning themselves against a perceived news mainstream, they claim to represent voices unheard within mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). But they suffer from similar constraints as mainstream news, with lower access to non-state sources of information and even fewer resources to cover a broad range of speakers and topics (Atton and Hamilton 2008). Using quantitative content analysis and topic modelling, we investigated the speaker and topic diversity within mainstream and alternative online media.

Our results regarding speaker diversity confirm previous findings by Buyens and Van Aelst (2022): Overall, alternative media mostly show similar patterns of sourcing as mainstream news, with the largest share of sources in all outlets except the human rights outlet going to domestic political elites and public administration officials. Still, we find interesting differences in who does get cited: Right-wing partisan online outlets do not increase the range of speakers from civil society, but instead focus on amplifying speakers from right-wing populist parties and alternative media from within their own media-sphere. This is in line with descriptions that consider the right-wing alternative media sphere as a tool for well-organized partisan actors from the political right rather than a tool for civil society (Bennett and Livingston 2018). This appears to be the case in Germany in particular since the populist AfD seems to have played a central role in establishing a right-wing media sphere (Heiss and Matthes 2020). Meanwhile, left-wing activist and mainstream-like outlets are more closely aligned with civil society actors (Buyens and Van Aelst 2022) particularly, within European countries, concerning the issue of immigration and refugee policy (Crepaz 2022). Future research should investigate if there is a connection with types of funding: Both the mainstream-like and partisan outlets we investigated on the left were run non-commercially or as cooperatives, while we investigated the more prominent commercially oriented outlets and state-funded media on the right. There might be a link between participatory values underlying alternative journalism (Harcup 2011) and non-commercial funding, that is, more prominent on the left (Heft et al. 2020; Atton and Hamilton 2008).

At the same time, both partisan and more mainstream-like alternative outlets on the left are also clearly amplifying the parliamentary far left. Our results remind us that we should be wary of alternative media's claim to represent "the people," since, as Laclau (2007) proposes, "the people" is always a signifier used to unite diverse groups of actors, from minority groups to dominant social groups.

Our analysis of topic diversity confirms previous observations (Freudenthaler and Wessler, 2022) that alternative media are very diversified: We find that *partisan* outlets maintain a content structure that strongly focuses on topics that further negative attitudes towards immigrants, namely cultural threats, and the successes of the anti-immigration movement. These outlets appear to engage in *agenda building* against mainstream media (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019). Interestingly, the *partisan left-wing* alternative outlet seems to follow the same topical agenda: We would interpret this as far-left activism mainly focusing on countering the right's messaging and warning of the strength of far-right movements. On the other hand, we find that more mainstream-oriented alternative media, both on the left and the right, follow a very similar content structure as mainstream news. We suspect a strategy of *agenda accommodation*: To serve as legitimate competitors to mainstream media, we suggest these outlets try to cover the same topics that are deemed newsworthy within the mainstream. This suggests that the same pressures for news homogeneity that afflict mainstream outlets (Boczkowski 2010) also affect alternative outlets. These findings are in line with previous research that pointed out that alternative media differ in their "alternativeness": Some, it appears, do target niche audiences with niche topics, but others adapt coverage more closely to mainstream news (Mayerhöffer 2021).

As previously mentioned, the methods used within this article suffer from draw-backs that invite avenues for additional research. One direction would be more accurately tracking individual events and voices brought to light in alternative media – for example, through qualitative research focusing on individual events or through automated methods for tracking news events (Moutidis and Williams 2020). To broaden the scope of our measurement of speaker diversity, automated measures like named-entity-recognition could offer an overview over larger datasets (Goyal, Gupta, and Kumar 2018).

A further limitation consists in the distribution of alternative media we analyzed within this article. We especially caution against direct comparison of outlets based on their left-right-orientation. An implicit assumption within such comparisons is often the functional equivalence of outlets on both sides of a political spectrum. But as mentioned previously, non-commercial alternative outlets appear to be more common on the political left, and activist media to be common within pro-refugee groups. Meanwhile, we found a larger number of partisan media on the right. With such organizational differences between outlets, it is probable that the breadth of types of outlets explain differences, rather than their left-right orientation. At the same time, a broader sampling strategy might bring to light a larger number of partisan media on the left, and examples of activist media on the right. We suggest that research should focus on identifying different types of alternative outlets within online public spheres before generalizing similarities and differences along partisan lines. Future research should aim to identify consistent typologies of alternative news outlets – we hope our contribution aids in that endeavor.

Notes

1. With partisan we refer to a more transparent expression of the political orientation of the outlet, with a lack of distinction between opinion and reporting and more openly opinionated reporting throughout. These outlets can be party-affiliated, or influential political actors themselves, as is the case with Breitbart in the US (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020).

2. Notably, we include RTdeutsch as mainstream-like due to the tone of coverage we found in previous research which we suspect might coincide with a breadth of coverage similar to mainstream outlets. As Elswah and Howard (2020) show, the outlet is a foreign policy tool of the Russian state engaging in strategic communication to further the interests of the Russian government. A professional tone and a broad thematic range mirroring professional reporting probably serves to legitimize the outlet in the eyes of readers, but does not indicate that they conform to professional journalistic standards, especially concerning neutrality and objectivity in reporting.
3. The activist media we chose are not *journalistic* media but provide regular releases in the form of activist news (ProAsyl), reports, and news published in print and online (Amnesty International), or blog posts (SeaWatch), which we found were widely shared on social media supplementing news coverage of the topic.
4. The keywords used were: Schutzsuchende, Migration*, Flüchtl*, Geflüchtete, Asyl*, Zuwander*, Migrant*, Einwander*, Refugee, Abschieb*, Abgeschob*, Seenotrettung (English translation: protection seekers, migration, refugee, refuge taker, asylum, immigrant, migrant, incomer, refugee, deportation, deported, sea rescue).
5. Initially, we added a category for politicians not affiliated with a particular party. Within our sample, we found only 13 cases, distributed almost evenly among outlets. Due to low reliability of that category (Krippendorff's Alpha < .7), we dropped the category from our analysis, but checked to ensure the dropped category did not affect the results.
6. This category usually also includes business speakers, but we found that in the German context, business speakers are rarely cited in that role (Masini et al. 2018) and instead speak for interest groups, due to Germany's corporatist economy. For future research, it would be interesting to differentiate interest groups based on influence and economic backing to differentiate between (economic) elites and the periphery of civil society, but due to lack of official data, such differentiations are difficult even in countries with official lobby registries (McKay and Wozniak 2020). For the advantages and disadvantages of corporatism for democratic deliberation, see Dryzek (2000, 91–93; 106–107). Similarly, religious organizations were not differentiated from other interest groups.
7. The Hellinger distance was chosen since it is a distance measure suited for probability distributions (Hellinger 1909) – the topic distribution of the LDA topic modelling output is the probability of each article to contain any of the K topics the modelling algorithm identifies.
8. To make sure this difference is not due to the way we clustered topics into topic groups, we additionally tested whether the diversity over all individual topics is higher in mainstream outlets. We again find significantly higher topic diversity in mainstream outlets ($t(17.08) = -3.482, p = .003$).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Chung-Hong Chan for his support in conducting the analyses.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at: https://osf.io/kg9y6/?view_only=e4a2e99bffd84d4a97d863347c388bf3

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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