In this chapter, we examine the rise of new alternative online political media (AOPM) and ask whether these sites challenge or exacerbate the spread of populism and mis/disinformation. We provide a critical overview of the debates within academic literature about alternative media, populism, and mis/disinformation. Overall, we argue that while many of these debates do not represent new phenomena, there is a need to develop different ideas and questions in the context of today’s hybrid media system and AOPM’s relationship with mainstream media, populism, and mis/disinformation. Informed by relevant literature, we argue that while there are clear connections between AOPM and populism, and some evidence of misinformation, they do not feature the kind of blatant acts of disinformation often found in fake online news sites.

New phenomenon? Alternative online political media, populism, disinformation

Alternative media has long been recognised as important within political communication (Atton 2002; Couldry & Curran 2003). In particular, new social movements, and citizen and independent journalism, have attracted considerable academic attention over recent years. Amid ever-shifting media systems, contemporary forms of alternative media have emerged. These newer forms – which we term AOPM – have attempted to become legitimate sources of news and commentary and, by taking advantage of internet and social media reach, have built up varying levels of influence, sometimes exceeding that of their mainstream counterparts (Waterson 2017). Terms such as ‘alternative news media’ (Holt, et al. 2019), ‘alternative and partisan news websites’ (Newman, et al. 2019, 23), and ‘right-wing online news sites’ (Heft, et al. 2019) have appeared in recent scholarship. However, while ‘alternative media’ are not new, the wider dissemination of alternative digital news and commentary clearly represents a break from the past.

AOPM are distinguished by their digital-native (Thomas & Cushion 2019) status via websites and social media. They are characterised by strong political editorialisation of news and comment and an explicit self-identification as alternatives to mainstream media (Holt, et al. 2019, 2). Notable global publications include O Antagonista (Brazil), Breitbart News (US), Rebel News (Canada), The Canary (UK), PI News (Germany), Steigan (Norway), and New Matilda (Australia). Despite their novelty, these alternative media still fit many of the broad
characteristics defining alternative media as existing outside ‘mainstream media institutions and networks’, populated by non-professionals seeking to represent marginalised interests and contest media power imbalances (Atton 2007, 18). Such characteristics have evolved, but despite some core similarities, AOPM vary in content, appearance, audience, and reach.

The often-partisan nature of AOBM is exemplified by the US site, Breitbart News. During the 2016 US presidential election for example, it was declared ‘the platform for the alt-right’ by chairman Steve Bannon (Posner 2016) and grew its audience by focusing on topics such as climate change denial and anti-immigration and anti-Democratic Party rhetoric. During the 2017 UK general election campaign, the left-wing website The Canary also attracted attention by reaching millions of people with content embracing anti-austerity, social justice, and criticism of the Conservative Party and the mainstream media (Waterson 2017).

From different political perspectives, both Breitbart News and The Canary have been accused of promoting populist ideologies and spreading disinformation. Breitbart, for example, became infamous for its propagation of the ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy (Robb 2017), while The Canary was admonished for publishing false accusations that BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg spoke at a Conservative Party conference (BBC News 2017). These debates have been driven by the electoral success of populist political parties across the world and are underpinned by generally low levels of trust in news (Newman, et al. 2019; Fletcher, et al. 2018). Noppari et al. (2019), for example, found that those consuming populist ‘counter media’ in Finland were motivated by a shared mistrust of legacy journalism. Populism and disinformation are often characteristics associated with concerns about the new digital media environment, raising important questions about their relationships with alternative media. While the evidence is thin, scholars have suggested the rise of alternative media should be seen in conjunction with populist agendas developing global momentum (Heft, et al. 2019, 3–4).

Despite the simultaneous emergence of populist politics and AOPM, the latter should not be regarded as populist without empirical evidence linking the two (Heft, et al. 2019). Similarly, the connection between alternative media and mis/disinformation should also not be assumed but led by evidence (Riebling & Wense 2019). Nonetheless, campaign groups including Stop Funding Fake News and Sleeping Giants have convinced commercial organisations to withdraw advertising from Breitbart and Evolve Politics, on the basis that they promote ‘fake news’. Similarly, other alternative media have been dubbed ‘false’ news producers and ‘blacklisted’ by fact-checkers and mainstream journalists (Rone 2019).

Measuring the impact of AOPM and their potential role in propagating populism and mis/disinformation is a complex task. Their reach should not be overstated. For example, the weekly use of UK alternative sites ranges from 1 percent to 17 percent, and ‘alternative and partisan sites’ reached just 6 percent of the 1,711 participants tracked during the 2019 UK general election (Fletcher, et al. 2020). Heft, et al. (2019) found varying levels of website engagement across six western democracies; in the US, four right-wing alternative sites ranked in the top 1,000 most visited websites.

AOPM’s reach is perhaps greatest across social media sites. In the UK, for example, Another Angry Voice had over 350,000 Facebook followers as of May 2020, roughly double the total for The New Statesman and one-tenth the total of popular tabloid The Daily Mirror. An audience study during the 2019 UK general election campaign showed that many alternative media sites significantly increased their social media reach since the previous 2017 general election (Thomas & McDowell-Naylor 2019). Another important measure of impact is the inter-media agenda-setting effects of alt-media sites. For example, journalists such as Ash Sarkar (Novara Media) and Ben Shapiro (Breitbart) often appear on mainstream media, extending their influence beyond alternative media sites.
Conceptualising alternative online political media

There are many long-standing conceptualisations of alternative media (see Holt, et al. 2019). Terms include ‘hyper-partisan news outlets’ (Marwick & Lewis 2017), ‘Facebook-empowered hyperpartisan political clickbait sites’ (Faris, et al. 2017, 19), and ‘alternative and partisan news websites’ (Newman, et al. 2019, 23). Holt et al. (2019, 3) argue that AOPM are characterised by ‘a proclaimed and/or (self-)perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system’. Additionally, ideological definitions such as ‘right-wing online news sites’ (Heft, et al. 2019) often refer to anti-immigrant and conservative outlets. Terms such as ‘populist counter media’ have also been used as it is claimed that they better capture the specifics of alternative media in a national context (Noppari, et al. 2019). The common feature among these definitions is the centrality of digital news and commentary. While alternative media research may have previously encompassed media characterised as ‘radical . . . autonomous, activist, independent, participatory and community’ (Rauch 2016, 757), contemporary research has more specifically focused on journalism. As a result, conceptual understandings of AOPM are already connected to current debates and concerns about the value and function of journalism (Pickard 2019), of which populism (Hameleers, et al. 2018) and disinformation (Chadwick, et al. 2018) are at the forefront.

Long-standing conceptual debates fundamentally ask how alternative media are understood in relation to legacy/mainstream media. Earlier studies of alternative media applied conceptual frameworks relying on simplistic binary models, but since then, these models have developed into more complicated frameworks embracing hybridity. Within the earlier binary models, for example, alternative media were often understood as progressive and democratic, closely tied to social movements and working in opposition to elitist, monetised, and homogeneous mainstream media (Holt, et al. 2019). However, it has been increasingly recognised that both alternative and mainstream media are more heterogenous than their previous generations. Atton (2002), for example, argues that alternative media are not intrinsically connected to social movements while Harcup (2005, 370) believes that the conceptual relationship between the two can be understood as a continuum on which people, ideas, and practices move bidirectionally.

These conceptual turns to hybridity have carried through to contemporary conceptual thinking. Hackett and Gurleyen (2015), for example, strongly advocate a continuum model while, more recently, Holt, et al. (2019, 3) propose a ‘relational, multi-level’ model in which content, organisational structure, and the overall function of alternative and mainstream media form multi-layered continuums. Of course, these important developments also fit within broader understanding notions of a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017). Key changes in alternative media are likely driven by this ‘overall hybridisation of media systems’ (Holt, et al. 2019, 7; see also Robertson and Mourão 2020, 17).

Finally, criticism of the mainstream media is another defining aspect of AOPM. Indeed, the stated objectives of many sites is to challenge mainstream media orthodoxy. The Canary (2020), for example, propose a ‘truly independent and viable alternative’ to largely ‘conservative’ coverage. In Germany, Politically Incorrect News (2020) claim that ‘political correctness and goodwill dominate the media everywhere today’ and that the ‘fundamental right to freedom of expression and information’ should be insisted on. Australian site New Matilda (2020) asserts that amid ‘shrinking media diversity’, ‘fewer and fewer outlets’ publish ‘independent-minded’ journalism. Finally, Rebel News (2020) in Canada claims to tell ‘the other side of the story’, even if it does not align with ‘the official narrative of the establishment’.
In this regard, AOPM can be conceptualised as a ‘self-perceived corrective’ of ‘legacy’ or ‘mainstream’ news media (Holt, et al. 2019, 3). This performative role often includes claims that the MSM is lying to defend the establishment or that it is biased against particular politicians. It might also be accompanied by a reframing of events with some form of the ‘truth’ (Robertson & Mourão 2020, 12). Such conceptual understandings of AOPM’s corrective role embrace a more fundamental struggle to define ‘the truth’ (see Riebling & Wense 2019) and contest general debates about journalistic truth, legitimacy, and trust related to populism and disinformation (Pickard 2019). Studies of alternative media in the UK have shown that the MSM generally and public service media specifically have been the objects of most criticism between 2015 and 2019, with their news reporting under constant surveillance from sites such as Evolve Politics and The Canary (Cushion 2020).

Discussing the evidence base

But what empirical evidence exists to link AOPM with mis/disinformation and populism? Is there evidence of AOPM contributing to – or challenging – mis/disinformation online or supporting populist politics? At present, while there is some evidence that empirically connects AOPM to mis/disinformation or populism, in our view more research is needed to draw clearer conclusions.

For several reasons, many observers consider AOPM sites to be a source of both populist ideologies and disinformation. First, since many AOPM sites are created by non-professionals, there is often an assumption they will not follow professional journalistic standards, such as objectivity. Second, because they are generally partisan, it might be also assumed they promote ‘fake news’ in pursuit of their editorial/ideological missions. Third, their critiques of mainstream media and the ‘establishment at large’ echo common populist tropes, which in turn means we may form connections between these critiques and populist politicians such as Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn, who have promised to ‘take on the establishment’.

These points may have been aided by some of the prominent examples of disinformation previously explored. While often these assumptions may well be correct, as Noppari et al. (2019, 23) caution, populist victories, ‘fake news’, and the proliferation of alternative media websites have been habitually drawn together under a post-truth narrative. But despite many media commentators regularly making these connections, academic research has yet to establish any causal relationship.

Alternative online political media and mis/disinformation

As Rone (2019) points out, there are few sources of systematic academic evidence directly linking alternative media and mis/disinformation. Where links have been established, they tend to be within larger studies that explore misinformation more generally.

In their extensive report on online disinformation, Marwick and Lewis (2017, 19) describe how online communities are increasingly turning to predominately right-wing, conspiracy-driven news sources (see also Robb 2017). For example, the report identifies Alex Jones, who runs alternative media site Info Wars, and his promotion of the Barack Obama ‘birther’ conspiracy.4 This is empirically supported by Starbird (2017), who determined via an analysis of Twitter that the sharing of conspiracy-based narratives online was directly fuelled by sources of alternative media. This was also supported by Buzzfeed’s analysis of Facebook (Silverman 2016). Marwick and Lewis (2017) also point out that conspiratorial claims are then covered by the mainstream media, which then perpetuate disinformation.
In looking at how mis/disinformation spreads online, Chadwick, et al. (2018) evidence its production and consumption by examining both media reporting and people’s use of it. Using a survey of over 1,000 Twitter users who had shared news sources, researchers investigated the prominence of ‘democratically dysfunctional news sharing’: what they term the sharing of news sources containing dis/misinformation. There was no evidence that sharing information from UK alternative sites such as Breitbart London, Westminster, Canary, and Evolve Politics was a predictor of such democratically dysfunctional news sharing (Chadwick, et al. 2018). This was despite these sites featuring prominently in the top 50 most shared news sources in their dataset of those shared by citizens (ibid).

To date, there are no comprehensive studies of AOPM content itself. However, in studying how ‘fake news’ sites discursively self-present, Roberton and Mourão (2020) link alternative news and mis/disinformation further by compiling a list of 953 websites labelled ‘fake news’ by third-party experts, activists, and journalists. They find that these sites frequently adopt ‘the discourses of alternative journalism’ and that this suggests a link between the two phenomena, wherein sites create an ‘impersonation of alternative journalism, combining its features with false information’ (ibid: 16, emphasis in original). Furthermore, there is evidence that AOPM often label mainstream media ‘fake news’ (Fingenschou & Ihlebæk 2019; Riebling & Wense 2019), complicating the picture further.

The sporadic evidence of links between alternative media and mis/disinformation tends to focus on high-profile incidents, such as Pizzagate or The Canary’s false reporting on Laura Kuehnberg. Despite these notable cases, in comparing ten alternative media outlets across Europe, Rone (2019) found limited empirical evidence of mis/disinformation. The study argued that AOPM were characterised by a focus on a narrow set of topics according to their editorial biases and that ‘disinformation is only one, and a rather minor, aspect’ of alternative media. Moreover, since ‘alternative media’ can refer to many different groups of already-heterogenous sites across media systems, there is an ontological problem. While some claim to find explicit links between AOPM and disinformation (Faris 2017; Marwick & Lewis 2017), others (Chadwick, et al. 2018; Rone 2019) doubt such assumptions. Viewed another way, many alternative media sites may be spreading the same kind of misinformation that many partisan mainstream media outlets follow. Indeed, the UK editor of The Canary is on record as saying she adopts a kind of ‘tabloid styling, tabloid-level language’ in order to champion the site’s political issues (Chakelian 2017).

**Alternative media and populism**

Evidence that links alternative media and populism is more substantive than with mis/disinformation, but there are only a limited number of empirical studies exploring this relationship.

Research carried out by Reuters has shown that ‘alternative or partisan outlets’ are ‘often favoured by those with populist views, in addition to having audiences with a heavy left-right skew’ (Newman, et al. 2019, 43). In particular, the research highlights both The Canary and Breitbart as those with ‘very populist audiences’ (ibid, 46). Together with AOPM’s reliance on social media, the fact that people with populist attitudes are heavy Facebook News users (Newman, et al. 2019, 42) and research indicating that social media facilitates populist messaging (Engesser, et al. 2016), the synergies are clear to see. Simplified populist discourses that divide society into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ groups have shown to be very persuasive (Hameleers, et al. 2018). As Mazzolini and Bracciale argue (2018, 3), social media platforms are suited to the kind of emotional and controversial content shared by populists. The evident adoption of these kinds of discourses by AOPM may be in part what is driving their success, particularly on social media.
Noppari et al. (2019) explored how and why Finnish users consume ‘populist counter media’. Based on interviews with a demographically diverse set of their readers, the researchers found 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’ (ibid, 33, emphasis added). In particular, Noppari et al. identified a user archetype they termed ‘system sceptics’ (ibid, 29), whose broadly anti-establishment and legacy media views mirrored typically populist attitudes. These users viewed populist counter media as ‘a way to construct and share material that could counter, challenge and bypass the ideological power of the mainstream media’ (ibid, 30). However, these valuable qualitative findings come from just one national study.

In the German/Austrian context, Haller and Holt’s (2019) study of the populist PEGIDA movement’s Facebook page found that alternative media sources were overwhelmingly (99 per cent of the time) used to affirm the existing political views of users (ibid, 1674). The researchers suggest this connection relates to the anti-system content of the alternative media observed, supporting Noppari et al.’s interview findings. More recently, Rae (2020) has argued that populism and alternative media such as Breitbart and The Canary share inherent media logics, including ‘personalisation’, ‘emotionalization and simplification’, ‘polarisation’, ‘intensification’, and ‘anti-establishment’, which are evidently reflected in the practices of what she terms ‘hyper partisan news’ (ibid, 4). With respect to personalisation, Marwick and Lewis (2017, 47) observed that ‘there is increasing evidence that Trump voters primarily consumed hyperpartisan news, much of which, like Infowars and Breitbart, played a key role in amplifying subcultural messages’.

While there is evidence to suggest a link between AOPM and populism, there are important caveats. For instance, Reuters research shows that people with populist attitudes still prefer television to online as their main source of news (Newman, et al. 2019, 42), meaning claims that AOPM are a primary driver of populist attitudes are overly simplified. Again, due to evidence that AOPM’s reach is limited, the accommodation of populism in broadcast and tabloid media is likely to be far more effective.

Considerations for future empirical research

As we have noted, alternative media scholars have been stressing the importance of hybridity for many years. In sum, it is currently 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’ (Noppari, et al. 2019, 24). Consequently, a wider range of news providers could potentially provide more diversity in information and commentary but might also increase the visibility and impact of ‘partisan information, disinformation and “fake news”’ (Figenschou & Ihlebæk 2019, 1221).

In addition to AOPM sites themselves, social media platforms have been key to populism and disinformation debates. Engesser et al. (2016), for example, showed how European politicians use Twitter and Facebook to spread populist ideologies. Meanwhile, Chadwick et al. (2018) identified a link between social media, tabloid journalism, and the spread of mis/disinformation. This is important since social media environments are central to concerns about spreading disinformation and are crucial to how AOPM disseminate content. According to Newman, et al. (2019, 39), 30 percent of those participating in UK news groups within Facebook or WhatsApp use alternative or partisan brands, compared with just 7 percent for the overall sample.
Moreover, biases can be perpetuated by dominant discourses within commentary and analysis of AOPM. Terms such as partisan, for example, are often reserved exclusively for alternative outlets. Indeed, the term alternative might simply point to a position ‘beyond the mainstream, beyond the pale’ (Holt 2018, 52), and such understandings can lead to false accusations. This was the case when three Dutch news outlets were inaccurately labelled as ‘fake news’ in 2018 (Rone 2019). Moreover, tabloid news outlets are also consistently partisan (Deacon & Wring 2019) and are also a key part of dysfunctional news-sharing behaviour (Chadwick, et al. 2018). In the UK, right-wing partisan outlets such as The Sun, The Daily Mail, and The Telegraph supply the overwhelming majority of digital news (Newman, et al. 2019), emphasising that the impact of partisan-driven mis/disinformation is likely to be much more considerable when it is spread by mainstream media (see Moore 2020).

Conclusion

It is often claimed that the rise of AOPM is associated with populism and mis/disinformation, and that this toxic combination represents a new and more dangerous threat to the public sphere than other media. But, as we have explored in this chapter, the link between AOPM, populism, and mis/disinformation is not always clear cut or straightforward. Moreover, often conclusions about AOPM are based on assumptions lacking evidence and are largely driven by mainstream panics about so-called ‘fake news’. In our view, much more research is needed to establish whether AOPM challenge or exacerbate the spread of mis/disinformation or populism. More attention, for example, needs to be paid to the editorial agendas of AOPM, including assessing the accuracy and balance of coverage beyond high-profile stories. As audience research has established (Bursztyn 2020), public confusion with media misinformation is as much a symptom of reporting in some politically biased and opinionated news outlets as it is in new AOPM. This suggests AOPM represent a continuation of partisan news reporting, rather than a new and more dangerous cause of populism or mis/disinformation.

Notes

1 During the 2016 US presidential election, it was claimed by many right-wing actors that Hillary Clinton was sexually abusing children during satanic rituals in the basement of a Washington, DC, pizza restaurant named Comet Ping Pong. A Rolling Stone investigative team (Robb 2017) traced the origins of the story through a vast digital network, prominently including Breitbart and Infowars.
2 This did, however, raise questions about her impartiality. The Canary was forced to correct the article and acknowledged it failed to ‘take all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy prior to publication’ (Hopkins 2017).
3 The Reuters Institute employs YouGov to conduct panel surveys and administer questionnaires on news consumption.
4 The ‘birther movement’ was formed around a false assertion that Barack Obama was an illegitimate president of the United States because he was not a natural-born citizen of the US, as required by Article Two of the Constitution. The conspiracy theory alleged his birth certificate was fake and that he was born in Kenya, not Hawaii. Donald Trump was among those to perpetuate the conspiracy theory.
5 See note 3.

References


Hopkins, S. (2017). The canary makes front page correction over false Laura Kuenssberg Tory conference story. *HuffPost*. Retrieved 6 April 2019, from www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/laura-kuenssberg-the-canary_uk_5a3aa097e4b0b0e5a79f0b4d


Alternative online political media


