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Alternative News Orientation and Trust in Mainstream Media: A Longitudinal Audience Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of online alternative news sites has enabled people to easily access viewpoints corresponding to their social and political identities and challenging mainstream media coverage. Taking an audience perspective and relying on a large four-wave panel survey from Sweden, this study examines orientation towards alternative news, paying specific attention to the potential reinforcing relationship with trust in mainstream media. Results show that increasing orientation towards alternative news is related to decreasing trust in mainstream media, and vice versa. In addition, the study highlights how alternative news orientation supplements rather than replaces consumption of traditional news. These findings provide valuable insights on the alternative news users and the dynamics of their media consumption, informing the debate on the role played by alternative news media in society.

KEYWORDS

Alternative news; media trust; uses and gratifications theory; reinforcing spirals model; panel data

In recent years, a growing number of alternative news sites have emerged online, positioning themselves as correctives to mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019). Based on strong ideological profiles representing anti-system and anti-elite attitudes, some alternative news media provide content that stands in opposition to the content found in mainstream news media (Holt 2018), often with an aim of social or political reform (Downing 2001). Prominent examples include Breitbart in the United States and The Canary in the United Kingdom, but many more alternative news outlets exist around the world.

The societal and democratic implications of this development are profound. On the one hand, alternative news sites present a potential challenge to society, as information found here may be biased or even false. As a consequence, alternative news media may exacerbate political polarization, but also foster misinformation and conspiracy theories (Mourão and Robertson 2019). On the other hand, alternative news media also create a more diverse media environment, where dominant narratives can...
be critically challenged and thoroughly deliberated. As such, these information sources enable people to nurse special interests and connect with like-minded people—something highlighted as important by, for example, the pluralism theory of democracy (Baker 2002).

To better understand the role played by alternative news media in society, however, we lack knowledge about the underlying mechanisms influencing the usage of these information sources. With notable exceptions (Leung and Lee 2014; Thorbjoernsrud and Figenschou 2020), the users of alternative news media have not received much attention in the literature. This is a seemingly paradox, as these media users are likely to be some of the most active and engaged audiences (Downing 2003). Therefore, this study takes an audience perspective and examines orientation towards alternative news media, paying specific attention to the potential reinforcing relationship with distrust in mainstream news media.

As media distrust is likely to be both a key reason for using alternative news but also a potential outcome of such consumption, we assume that the relationship indeed is reinforcing over time. Media trust has recently declined in many countries (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). With the emergence of many new alternative news sites online, people with low trust in mainstream media have more opportunities than previously for finding information that gives a different picture of reality and fits their worldview and social identity better than the one found in mainstream media. In addition, a central part of alternative news media is their criticism of mainstream media for deficient news coverage (Cushion 2021; Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ladd 2012), which may further fuel mistrust in mainstream media among alternative news users. Previous studies have confirmed the relationship between distrust in mainstream media and the use of alternative news (Fletcher and Park 2017; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati and Peri 2006). These studies have been limited by cross-sectional data, however, making it difficult to draw firm causal conclusions and examine the potential of an over-time reinforcement.

To examine the underlying reasons for alternative news consumption, this study, therefore, examines the relationship between people’s orientation towards alternative news and their trust in mainstream media over time, enabling us to examine their dynamic development longitudinally. In addition, the study examines how consumption of traditional news are linked to alternative news orientation. Empirically, the study is based on a four-wave panel survey with a large sample of the Swedish population conducted in 2018–2020 enabling longitudinal analysis. With an increasing number of online alternative news sites and polarizing attitudes on media trust, Sweden provides a good case for testing the dynamics at stake.

**Alternative News Orientation in a High-Choice Media Environment**

Over the past decades, the media environment has transformed from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment, as the amount of available information has accelerated (Van Aelst et al. 2017). Lately, this development has been driven in particular by digital inventions like personal computers, the Internet, smartphones, and social
As media choice has expanded, people’s preferences have come to play an increasingly important role in their media consumption (Napoli 2011; Prior 2007). As a consequence, media use has become more individualized and fragmented (Van Aelst et al. 2017). One example illustrating this development is that people’s political interest has become an increasingly important driver for their news consumption (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013). While people with a high interest in politics can seek out news constantly, people with a low interest likewise have ample opportunities for finding other content and avoiding news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). For those still consuming news, selective exposure to politically like-minded content has likewise become easier (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2008).

As part of this high-choice media environment, an increasing number of alternative news sites have emerged online. Such alternative news sites usually have strong ideological profiles, representing anti-system and anti-elite attitudes (Holt 2018), and provide coverage that stands in opposition to that of mainstream media, providing a platform for viewpoints usually ignored (Atton 2007; Haas 2004). Especially right-wing alternative news media have been very prominent. Alternative news media thereby illustrate how the boundaries of journalism are fading, challenging journalists’ monopoly as a trustworthy source of information (Lewis 2012). As part of their profile, alternative media also attack mainstream media for being untrustworthy (Cushion 2021; Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ladd 2012), criticizing them for being biased, being distanced from the people, excluding important voices, and instead acting as an uncritical platform for those in power (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019).

From a historical perspective, alternative news media have been closely linked to social movements. Thus, alternative news media often thrive well in times of social and political turmoil (Downing 2001). Alternative media can therefore, in a broad sense, be defined as “media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in mainstream media and to advocate social and political reform” (Haas 2004, 115). As such, alternative news media is nothing new, and they have existed for a long time (Downing 2001). But with the technological developments described above they have expanded in numbers, as it has become easier for producers to establish and run alternative news media, also for non-journalists, and easier for the audience to access them. This development is further supported by social media, where alternative news media can easily distribute their content. Previous studies have also highlighted that alternative news media take up a large proportion of shared news on social media (Sandberg and Ihlebaek 2019; Thorbjønsrud and Figenschou 2020). With algorithms catering for people’s preferences (Thorson et al. 2021), social media platforms further stress the importance of understanding the underlying drivers of people’s alternative news consumption.

According to the uses and gratifications theory, people use the media they do to gratify certain needs (Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas 1973). Within this framework, audience behaviour can be seen as either ritualized or instrumental (Rubin 1984). While ritualized media use is passive and habitual, often driven by a need for diversion, instrumental media use is active and often done for informational reasons. Further, instrumental media use is likely to produce greater effects than ritualized media use,
as the audience will have a higher motivation to involve themselves with the content they are exposed to (Rubin 2002). Consumption of alternative news can be seen as instrumental, as the alternative news users are likely to actively seek information that better fulfil their preferences and gratify their needs than the content found in mainstream media. In other words, alternative news users are likely to be highly motivated and engaged when consuming information from these sources (Downing 2003). In practice, the audience can access information from alternative news media directly on the websites of these outlets, but often their content is also accessed on social media (Sandberg and Ihlebaek 2019; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2020).

To study the role played by alternative news media in people’s media diets and their motives for relying on such information sources, we examine their alternative news orientation. Drawing on the concept of media orientations from the uses and gratifications framework in general, and instrumental orientations in particular (Rubin 2002; Ruggiero 2000), we understand alternative news orientation as the extent to which people actively seek out information from sources that provide new or different perspectives on societal issues, either directly or via social media, that are more in correspondence with the users’ own views than information found in mainstream media. As such, alternative news orientation reflects the extent to which people exploit the opportunities given by today’s high-choice media environment to rely on other sources than mainstream media for obtaining news and current affairs content. As we elaborate on below, alternative news orientation is in particular likely to be related to people’s trust in mainstream media.

(Dis)Trust in Mainstream Media

One of news media’s most important roles in society is to select and convey information that people need to understand politics and society (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; Nielsen 2017). However, it is not possible for journalists to report reality one to one. Instead, journalists highlight certain information over other as they produce their news reports. For the audience to trust the media, they therefore need to accept a certain risk, as they do not have the resources and capabilities to judge the reliability of each piece of information and check whether the journalists are doing a good job (van Dalen 2020). According to Kohring and Matthes (2007), media trust has four dimensions in this regard; trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, and trust in journalistic assessment. As wrong information can have negative consequences, trust in the media can be defined as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018, 5).

Trust is important for the media themselves, as it affects their reputation and ultimately economic profit (Vanacker and Belmas 2009). But trust also gives the media legitimacy and thereby helps them serve their roles in society as, for example, a watchdog or facilitator of public debate. If the mainstream media are not trusted, it will be easier for politicians and other people in power to ignore their criticism (van Dalen 2020). On a societal level, trust in the mainstream media also helps to create a collective
sense of community by fostering “belief in a shareable reality” (Coleman 2012, 36). If people have a low media trust it can thus lead to a situation where other information sources, such as alternative news media, will be deemed equally or perhaps even more trustworthy. As such, low trust can ultimately undermine the shared perception of reality leading to epistemic crisis (Dahlgren 2018). However, it is important to note that the decline in media trust has been most clearly demonstrated in the United States (Gronke and Cook 2007; Hanitzzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Ladd 2012; van Dalen 2020). In other parts of the world, mainstream media is still trusted by large part of the public (Hanitzzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

Media trust is linked to trust in other societal institutions, such as, for example, the political system. If people’s trust in the political system declines, so does their trust in the mainstream media—the so-called “trust nexus” (Hanitzzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Partisan identity has also been identified as a key driver for people’s trust in mainstream media (Gronke and Cook 2007; Jones 2004). As such, increasing political polarization might also lead to increasing mistrust. When political polarization unfolds, people are more likely to take extreme positions in politically relevant discourses (Prior 2013). In consequence, people with strong opinions will be more likely to meet cross-cutting messages that they will not agree with, and thus not trust, in mainstream media (Suiter and Fletcher 2020). This dynamic may also be caused by the phenomena known as the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985), where people with strong opinions find media coverage to be biased against them irrespective of whether this is the case or not. In consequence, these people may orientate themselves towards alternative news instead. Indeed, research suggests that alternative news users can be described as “alarmed citizens,” characterized by low trust in the elite and established institutions (Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2020).

**A Reinforcing Process?**

The relationship between people’s trust in mainstream media and their orientation towards alternative news is likely to be reciprocal over time, as suggested by the reinforcing spirals model (Slater 2007, 2015). According to this framework, attitudinal outcomes of media use, such as generalized trust in the mainstream media, can be expected to influence selection and attention to media content, such as use of alternative news media. As such, the relationship between selection and media effects should be seen as a potentially dynamic and ongoing process, where media use functions both as an outcome variable and a predictor variable. This dual relationship can lead to a reinforcing spiral over time, particularly when attitudes are related to social and political identities, which is likely to be the case for alternative news orientation and mainstream media trust.

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the reinforcing spirals model argues that media use is a principal mean in the maintenance of social identities among subcultures (Slater 2007, 2015). Social and political identities will make people selectively attend to media content that reflects and shares the values of their group. As a consequence, people’s identity will be more salient for them, leading to additional reinforcement. Such processes are particularly likely among groups that
seek to shield themselves from outside influences, for example, by using group-specific media, such as alternative news sites, that consistently reiterate a consistent and distinctive worldview (Slater 2007, 2015), for example, that the mainstream media cannot be trusted. Over time, this can lead to increased hostility towards out-groups, such as the mainstream media and the elite in general.

Although previous research on the relationship between media trust and media use is limited (Strömbäck et al. 2020), studies, in general, support the idea that lower trust in mainstream media is associated with more use of alternative news media (Ladd 2012; Mourão et al. 2018; Tsfati and Cappella 2003). There are different potential reasons for this. First, in terms of selection effects, low trust in mainstream media may lead people to actively turn to the alternative news media that provide the information these people feel they are lacking. Such behaviour reflects an instrumental media orientation, as described by the uses and gratifications theory (Rubin 1984). Second, also in relation to selection effects, low trust in mainstream media may lead to a situation where people instead use heuristics, such as correspondence with one’s social identity and perception of reality, when assessing what information is credible (Metzger and Flanagin 2013; Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders 2010). In this way, information from alternative news sites will seem more trustworthy to those who do not trust the mainstream media. Lastly, in terms of media effects, alternative news media also criticize mainstream media for deficient news coverage (Cushion 2021; Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, and Thomas 2021; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019; Ladd 2012), which may lead to lower trust in mainstream media among alternative news users. When people are constantly exposed to the narrative that mainstream media cannot be trusted, a natural consequence will be declining media trust.

In sum, explanations can be identified for both selection effects, where low trust in mainstream media leads to more use of alternative news, and media effects, where more use of alternative news leads to lower trust in mainstream media. Therefore, we have the following expectation.

H1: The relationship between alternative news orientation and mainstream media trust is reinforcing over time, with decreases in mainstream media trust leading to increases in alternative news orientation, and vice versa.

Supplement or Replacement?

The idea of a reinforcing spiral could lead to the conclusion that media use and attitudes will become increasingly extreme over time. However, as Slater (2007) writes, “the pattern of mutual reinforcement between the selection of media content and the effects of such content … will rarely lead to extremes of attitude or behaviour. Instead, this pattern may result in the maintenance of various attitudes and behaviours for users of specific media content despite competing influences” (289). In our case, “competing influences” should be understood as mainstream media versus alternative news media. As such, an orientation towards alternative news becomes a strive for a state of homeostasis where beliefs are maintained, or perhaps even reinforced, when facing competing worldviews from mainstream media. Thus, alternative news
users can be expected to adjust their media consumption to obtain a picture of the
lying mainstream media fitting their social identity and worldview.

The idea of competing influences from alternative news media and mainstream
media makes it relevant to examine the extent to which an orientation towards alter-
native news supplements or replaces use of traditional news media (Dutta-Bergman
2004). In essence, are people who orientate themselves towards alternative news sim-
ultaneously using mainstream news media, or are they rather turning their back to
mainstream media to rely mainly on alternative news media. Seen from the framework
of the reinforcing process model (Slater 2007, 2015), such adjustment of media con-
sumption reflects how people navigate among competing influences. As such, both
scenarios are possible. Either people orientate themselves towards alternative news to
get different perspectives on the news they get from mainstream media, or they turn
their backs to mainstream media to more or less exclusively rely on information from
alternative news. Thus, we suggest the following research question.

RQ1: Is alternative news orientation positively or negatively related to use of
traditional news?

The Swedish Case

To address our hypothesis and research question, we rely on panel survey data from
Sweden. As a typical democratic corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004),
Sweden has long been characterized by high newspaper circulation and a strong pub-
lic service broadcaster. Politically, the national newspapers are evenly balanced on the
left and right with ideological content being mainly a subject for the editorial pages
(Weibull 2013). In contrast to other countries, for example the United States, there are
no partisan television channels or talk radio. Thus, the mainstream media in Sweden is
rather homogeneous.

As in most other countries, however, patterns of news consumption are changing.
While regular newspaper readership (at least 3 days/week) has declined from over 80%
in the beginning of the century to 34% in 2019 (Andersson 2020), 50% are now get-
ing news from social media on a weekly basis (Newman et al. 2020). Online, people
can encounter endless amounts of information, including a number of alternative
news sites. Comparatively, the demand for alternative news is quite high in Sweden
with nine right-wing alternative news sites in the top one thousand Swedish websites
(Heft et al. 2020). The most well-known examples are the left leaning Dagens ETC and
the right leaning Fria Tider, Nyheter Idag, and Samhällsnytt, reaching approximately ten
percent of the population on a weekly basis (Newman et al. 2020). Very few of these
alternative news sites are connected to any specific political party, but they are consid-
ered to work as mouthpieces for political ideas strongly linked to specific political
actors (Weibull, Wadbring, and Ohlsson 2018; Dahlgren, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2019).

From a historical perspective, alternative news media is nothing new in Sweden. In
the 1960s and 70s, for example, a number of alternative papers and magazines were
associated with the “new left” movement. Inspired by the communist surge in
Western Europe, the movement directed an overall critic of the post-war society,
focussing on issues such as strikes and labour policy, racism in the United States and South Africa, and the Vietnam War (Gustafsson, Rydén, and Engblom 2002, 213–214). With no established political channels or political power, the movement had to create their own media outlets. By giving an alternative worldview compared to the mainstream media, the goal was to radicalize both the public opinion and the ruling Social Democratic Party (Gustafsson, Rydén, and Engblom 2002; Funke 2011). While the alternative news media of the 1960s and 70s were mostly situated on the political left, many of today’s alternative news media are in contrast situated on the political right, occupied by topics like immigration, crime, and how the mainstream media’s reporting on these subjects are driven by norms of political correctness (Holt 2018; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebaek and Nygaard 2021).

Despite the recent increase in alternative media sites, there has not been a general decline in trust for traditional media to the same extent as in other countries (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). In Sweden, approximately 40% of the population think that they can trust most news most of the time, which comparatively is neither very high nor very low (Newman et al. 2020). There are important nuances, however, as people voting for right leaning parties, and especially those voting for the nationalist and right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats, have less trust in the media than people voting for left leaning parties (Strömbäck and Karlsson 2017).

Methods

The utilized panel survey consists of four waves and was conducted by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) at the University of Gothenburg, using a probability-based sample of web survey participants. Importantly, LORE’s sampling procedure is not based on self-selected recruitment, but on probability sampling using both telephone and regular mail during the initial recruitment phase. A sample of 3,397 respondents, stratified on gender, age, education, and political interest, was drawn from LORE’s pool of probability-recruited participants. Wave 1 was fielded in late March 2018 (March 22–April 16), wave 2 in December 2018 (December 10–January 8), wave 3 in early October 2019 (October 7–October 28), and wave 4 in June 2020 (June 3–June 24). 2,291 respondents participated in wave 1 (AAPOR RR5: 67%), 1,880 in wave 2 (59%), 1,819 in wave 3 (63%), and 1,567 in wave 4 (58%). The fourth wave was collected during the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19)—a point that we will briefly return to when presenting and discussing the results.

Measures

To tap alternative news orientation, we use a set of five survey items covering the respondents’ general inclination to actively seek online news providing alternative perspectives on societal issues. This approach has the benefit of providing us with a general measure of people’s orientation towards alternative news, as the many available sources and their presence on social media make it difficult to capture exposure to specific outlets. The first two items were measured asking “How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow …” (1) “News about societal issues not
reported by the traditional media” as well as (2) “News that provide an alternative view on societal issues than traditional media” [Italics in original]. These two items were combined with three additional items on issue-specific alternative media usage: “How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow news that provide an alternative view than the traditional media on the following topics?” [Italics in original]. The items that followed were (3) “News about crime,” (4) “News about the climate and environment,” and (5) “News about integration and immigration.” Response categories on all five items ranged from 1 (Daily) to 6 (Never). Based on a PCA revealing one single dimension, these items were reversed and averaged into indices for each survey wave.

In line with recent recommendations concerning media trust (Strömbäck et al. 2020), respondents’ generalized trust in mainstream news media was measured using a four-item battery based on the survey question: “There are different views in society on news coverage in Swedish media. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? The traditional news media in Sweden…” [Italics in original]. Specific statements included: (1) “Don’t tell the truth about important societal issues” (reversed), (2) “Let all important voices be heard in the discussion,” (3) “Provide a one sided perspective on important issues” (reversed), and (4) “Provide the best and most reliable information about politics and society.” The response scales ranged from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree). A PCA suggested a clear unidimensional solution and the four items were therefore averaged into indices for each survey wave.

Also following recommendations in the literature (Andersen, de Vreese, and Albaek 2016), use of traditional news media was measured with a six-point scale from 1 (Daily) to 6 (Never) for a list of the most prominent mainstream news outlets, including Sveriges Radio (SR), Sveriges Television (SVT), TV4 Nyheterna, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Göteborgs-Posten, as well as the category “News from another local morning newspaper.” After reversing the scales, these items were averaged into indices for each survey wave.

As media consumption is closely linked to content preferences (Napoli 2011; Prior 2007), we also include a measure of interest in news, which was measured with a 5-point scale from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree) to the four items “I’m not interested in news about politics and society” (reversed), “I follow news about politics and society every day,” “I usually try to avoid news about politics and society” (reversed), and “I try to follow news about politics and society as much as I can.” Again, these four items were combined and averaged into indices for each survey wave.

Previous research has identified a so-called “trust nexus” (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018), where trust in different societal institutions, like the press and politicians, are closely interviewed. Likewise, Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg (2012) argue that lack of political and social capital—which, among other dimensions covers trust—makes people disconnect from mainstream news media. In our analysis, we therefore also include measures for political and social trust. Trust in politicians was measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (Very low trust) to 4 (Very high trust) ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .70$), while social trust was measured using an 11-point scaled ranging from 0 (People cannot be trusted in general) to 10 (People can be trusted in general), which
was recoded to range from 1 to 5 to make the scale more comparable with other measures.

In addition, measures of gender (1 = female), age, and education were also included. Age was measured with six categories (below 30, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, and 70 or above), and education was measured with a scale of different educational levels in Sweden, which was recoded to two categories, separating respondents with a university degree (1) from those with no university degree (0). Descriptive statistics for all variables can be seen in Appendix, Table A1.

**Analytic Approach**

To examine the dynamics of alternative news orientation and test the potential reinforcing relationship with trust in mainstream news media, we rely on three different analytic approaches. First, we provide some basic descriptives of alternative news orientation and mainstream media trust and examine how alternative news orientation relates to our additional variables cross-sectionally by examining bivariate correlations. Second, we turn to longitudinal analyses and conduct a parallel growth curve model to estimates two sets of intercepts and slopes based on our repeated measures of alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream news media (Acock 2013; Preacher et al. 2008). While the latent intercepts represent initial starting levels of each factor, the latent slopes capture individual linear change trajectories over time. This procedure allows for simultaneous analyses of correlations between (1) starting levels of alternative media orientation and media trust, and between (2) linear change trajectories as indications of a mutual reinforcement process, as well as (3) how these factors are related to various predictor variables. Evidence for mutual reinforcement from these models are only indicative, however. For instance, the analysis relies on linear change trajectories across the four panel waves but says nothing about time-order of these changes. Correlations may also be spurious due to unobserved third factors. Third, to provide an additional robustness test, we therefore analyse the impact of using a two-way fixed effects panel model, relying on within-person variation over time only (Allison 2009). A such, these models capture whether a within-person change in the independent variables are related to a within-person change in the dependent variable.

**Results**

To get a first sense of how alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream media develop over time, Figure 1 illustrates average levels of these two measures over the four survey waves for respondents participating in all waves and answering all relevant questions. The average on alternative news orientation is slightly below 3, corresponding to “once a month” on the original response scales. Across the four survey waves, approximately 16% of the respondents score four or above on the scale for alternative news orientation, corresponding to answering “once a week” or more often on the original response scales. In terms of mainstream media trust, the average is slightly above 3, which is the mid-point of the original response scales. While there is no
general change in alternative news orientation over time ($F_{3,4580} = .36, p = .78$), there is a slight increase in mainstream media trust ($F_{3,4580} = 4.13, p < .01$). These patterns reflect recent studies illustrating how media trust increased during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Andersson 2020; Newman et al. 2020), but this profound contextual change did not seem to affect the overall pattern of alternative news orientations among our respondents.

Figure 2 displays how different variables relate to having an orientation towards alternative news. Estimates are based on a series of bivariate regression models from the first wave of the panel survey, including respondents who answered all relevant questions. To enable comparison of effect sizes, all variables have been rescaled to range between 0 (lowest possible value) to 1 (highest possible value). Thus, estimates represent maximal effects, i.e., what happens when we move between the extreme points on each scale.

Looking first at our main independent variable, trust in mainstream news media displays a clear negative relationship with alternative news orientation ($b = -2.24, p < .001$). Thus, people who have complete trust in mainstream news media score on average 2.24 points lower on the 1–6 alternative news orientation index than those who have no trust at all in mainstream media. None of the other variables included display effects of comparable size. If we also consider predictive power, or amount of explained variance, trust in traditional media stands out as the single most important factor, accounting for 20% of the variation in alternative news orientation ($R^2_{adj} = .20$).

In terms of a more descriptive profile, people orientating themselves towards alternative news tend to be younger ($b = -.18, p < .05$) males ($b = -.43, p < .001$) with a lower education ($b = -.34, p < .001$), but a strong interest in news ($b = .77, p < .001$) as
well as a habit of also using traditional news media \( (b = .73, p < .001) \). As it is the case for media trust, their social \( (b = -1.15, p < .001) \) and political \( (b = -1.52, p < .001) \) trust is low, however. The positive relationship with traditional news use gives a first indication that alternative news orientation supplements consumption of traditional news media. The negative relationship with age might be a result of younger people’s general higher use of online media.

So far, the findings presented relate to bivariate between-person differences based on cross-sectional data from the first survey wave. Table 1 takes the next step by displaying results from a parallel growth curve model of alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream media. The latent intercept represents the initial starting value while the latent slope reflects the linear growth trajectory. Thus, the model estimates how our independent variables predict between-person differences in both levels and changes over time. In addition, covariances between latent factors indicate how alternative news orientation and mainstream media trust are correlated. Three main takeaways are worth highlighting.

First, looking at predictors of the latent intercept, many of the previous bivariate effects hold up when controls are included. In several cases, these predictors have contrasting effects on between-person differences in alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream media. For instance, political and social trust have negative effects on alternative news orientation \( (b = -.44, p < .001; b = -.10, p < .001) \) but positive effects on mainstream media trust \( (b = .58, p < .001; b = .12, p < .001) \). In terms of sociodemographic factors, being female has a negative effect on alternative news orientation \( (b = -.29, p < .001) \) but a positive effect on mainstream media trust \( (b = .09, p < .05) \). Likewise, age and education have negative effects on alternative news
orientation (b = -0.09, p < .001; b = -0.26, p < .001) but positive effects on mainstream media trust (b = 0.05, p < .001; b = 0.17, p < .001). Lastly, news interest and traditional news use continue to have positive impacts on alternative news orientation when the other factors are accounted for (b = 0.23, p < .001; b = 0.19, p < .001). The positive relationship with traditional news use once again indicates that alternative news orientation supplements use of traditional news media.

Second, beyond these effects on starting values, there are very few effects on the latent slopes. Only age displays a statistically significant association with the linear trajectory of alternative news orientation. Although older people are less likely to seek out alternative news initially, they catch up over time (b = 0.02, p < 0.05). For the development in mainstream media trust, people with higher social trust are more likely to increase their trust in mainstream media over time (b = 0.02, p < 0.01). All other effects are non-significant.

Third, the growth model also provides key information about the relationship between alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream news media. Both the covariances between the two latent intercepts (COV = -0.33, p < .001) as well as the two latent slopes (COV = -0.01, p < .001) are negative and statistically significant. Thus, there is evidence not only for a close cross-sectional connection between orientation towards alternative news and mainstream media trust, but indication of a correlated growth process as well. Over time, increasing use of alternative news is related to decreasing trust in mainstream media. This pattern is in line with a reinforcement process as suggested by the reinforcing spirals model.

Even though the growth model indicates the presence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between alternative media orientation and trust in mainstream media, these findings are not conclusive evidence of a causal reinforcing process. Two correlated growth curves may reflect other causal influences as well. To provide an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Estimates from the parallel growth curve model.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative News Orientation (ANO)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Latent intercept</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional news use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept ANO/Intercept MMT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept ANO/Slope ANO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slope ANO/Slope MMT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept MMT/Slope MMT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model fit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square (60)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Entries are unstandardized coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. The model was estimated using full information maximum likelihood with missing values (fiml).

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
alternative test of this relationship, Table 2 presents findings from two fixed effects panel models. Model 1 predicts alternative news orientation using mainstream media trust as the only predictor, along with time-specific dummies. As such, the estimates capture pure within-person effects over time. Model 2 imposes an even stronger test, by also including time-varying measures of news interest and traditional news use.

Model one shows that within-person changes in mainstream media trust has a negative effect on within-person changes in alternative news orientation ($b = -0.11$, $p < .001$). Thus, citizens who gain trust in mainstream media also become less oriented towards alternative media, and vice versa. Model 2 lend additional support to this within-person effect. Even when controlling for within-person changes in news interest ($b = 0.08$, $p < .001$) and traditional news media usage ($b = 0.10$, $p < .01$), trust in mainstream media remains a significant predictor of alternative news orientation ($b = -0.13$, $p < .001$). In addition, these results again illustrate how alternative news orientations supplements use of traditional news. When people’s traditional news use increases, their alternative news orientation also increases.

### Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this study has been to examine the dynamics of alternative news orientation, paying special attention to the potential reinforcing relationship with trust in mainstream media. Relying on a four-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden, our study provides three main findings. First, the study gives support for a reinforcing relationship with media trust over time, as decreasing trust in mainstream media is related to increasing alternative news orientation, and vice versa (H1). Although previous research has shown that media trust and use of alternative news media are related (Fletcher and Park 2017; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati and Peri 2006), our study thereby provides new knowledge by being the first to empirically show how this dual relationship unfolds over time. Second, our study also highlights that an orientation towards alternative news seems to supplement rather than replace traditional news consumption (RQ1). Lastly, in terms of a more descriptive profile of alternative news users, the study shows that younger and lower educated males with low media, social, and political trust, but also a high interest in news and consumption of traditional news, are more like to orientate themselves towards alternative news.

With these results, the study illustrates how alternative news orientation can be seen as a distinct form of instrumental media use within the uses and gratification theory (Rubin 2002; Ruggiero 2000). Alternative news users are interested in and

### Table 2. Effects of media trust on alternative news orientation (fixed effects model).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust in mainstream media</td>
<td>$-0.11^{***} (0.02)$</td>
<td>$-0.13^{***} (0.02)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News interest</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$0.08^{**} (0.02)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional news use</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$0.10^{**} (0.03)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel wave dummies</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-square (within)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (individuals/observations)</td>
<td>2,446/7,167</td>
<td>2,417/6,893</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.*

"$p < .05$, "$p < .01$, "$p < .001$."
consume traditional news. However, they do not trust mainstream media, just as they have low social and political trust. As such, they resemble what Norris (2011) labels the “critical citizens.” In consequence, they actively supplement their traditional news consumption with information from alternative news sources that mirrors their worldview and social identity better. As such, alternative news use seem to reflect a pattern of selective exposure to attitude-consistent sources rather than selective avoidance of attitude challenging sources (Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch 2013).

While our results indicate an over-time reinforcement between alternative news orientation and distrust in mainstream media, an important part of this relationship is likely attitude maintenance in a context of competing influences (Slater 2007). Thereby, the results support the idea of alternative news media as correctives to mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019) that also play a key role in delegitimizing mainstream media by attacking them for being untrustworthy (Cushion 2021; Ladd 2012). As media trust is declining in many countries (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, and Steindl 2018) and political polarization increases (Prior 2013), our results suggest that alternative news media will gain importance as information sources for people with low or decreasing levels mainstream media trust, but our results also suggest that alternative news users will still be exposed to news from mainstream media.

In the light of these findings, one might argue that alternative news may not be as big a societal problem as one could fear, as people orienting themselves towards alternative news are also using mainstream media and thereby get exposed to viewpoints challenging their attitudes (see also Andersen et al. 2021). As such, it may be possible to uphold a state of homeostasis where beliefs are maintained rather than reinforced. Here, however, it is crucial to question what individuals with low trust will actually gain from using mainstream media. In addition, our analyses also illustrate how mainstream media trust further decreases as a consequence of alternative news orientation. Thus, although alternative news media create a more diverse media environment where people can nurse special interests and connect with like-minded people, it also comes with the risk of polarization. In addition, research suggests that use of alternative news facilitate collective action, such as protesting, by fostering strong in-group identity and generating anger (Chan 2017). As such, an increasing importance of alternative news in people’s media diets is likely to have important societal consequences, which highlights the importance of understanding who the users of these information sources are.

Our study is of course not without limitations. Although the four-wave panel survey is a unique opportunity for examining how the relationships under consideration develop over time, the data is not perfect, as people with low media, political, and social trust are less likely to participate in such studies and more likely to drop out during the study. Further, we do not ask about consumption of specific alternative media sources, but rather a general orientation towards such sources. Thereby, we are not able to distinguish between users of right and left learning alternative media. Likewise, we are also not able to validate whether the respondents can classify what is meant by “alternative” in the survey questions. In addition, the dichotomous classification of alternative and mainstream media may be too simplistic, as some outlets may
fall in between (see Heft et al. 2020). Thus, future research could potentially examine the idea of competing influences from the perspective of a continuum instead.

Although we have identified indications of a reinforcing relationship, we still do not have hardcore proof of causality. Our results suggest a connection between media trust and alternative news orientation over time, but unobserved factors may still operate behind the scene. These limitations highlight the need for more research to get an even better understanding of the alternative media users. In this regard, qualitative research may be fruitful for obtaining in-depth understanding of this hard-to-reach group (Figenschou 2020; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2020). In addition, future research should also examine more closely how contextual changes, such as climate change, the immigration crisis, or a pandemic, affect alternative news orientations. Such times of crisis may both affect the emergence and consumption of alternative news media. Our analyses did not indicate any change in alternative news orientation during the coronavirus pandemic, but this might have looked different if we had been able to follow this crisis over a longer time period.

Despite these limitations, the study has illustrated how an orientation towards alternative news is closely tied with low trust in mainstream media, likely mutually reinforcing each other over time as the alternative news users supplements their traditional news use with alternative news media. Thereby, the study has provided valuable insights on the alternative news users and the dynamics of their media consumption.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for all variables.

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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