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Citation for final published version:

Cushion, Stephen 2022. UK Alternative left media and their criticism of mainstream news: analysing the Canary and Evolve politics. *Journalism Practice* 16 (8) , pp. 1695-1714. 10.1080/17512786.2021.1882875

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1882875>

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UK alternative left media and their criticism of mainstream news: Analysing The Canary and Evolve Politics

Abstract

As the media environment has fragmented over recent decades, scholars have paid increasing attention to the rise of alternative news and their relationship with mainstream media. This study enters into debates about the role and character of alternative media by examining recently launched left-wing sites in the UK, which explicitly define themselves *in opposition* to mainstream media. It carries out a large content analysis study of two sites – The Canary and Evolve Politics – between 2015 and 2019, examining 1284 articles and 3812 sources. Overall, the study found a strong editorial focus on criticising the government’s right-wing policy agenda, as well as opposition towards mainstream media – notably BBC news – with political reporting perceived as reinforcing an establishment-led agenda. This opposition to mainstream media has ideological consequences for the UK’s media system, with public service broadcasting the biggest casualty. The study recommends more theoretical and empirical attention should be paid to the systemic impact of alternative media on media systems given mainstream news is under attack across many countries.

KEYWORDS

Alternative media, mainstream media, public service broadcasting, content analysis, ideological news, political reporting

As the media environment has fragmented, increasing academic attention has been paid to the rise of alternative online news. Scholars have examined how alternative media have disrupted the agenda of established legacy news sites and present an alternative voice to mainstream media (Forde and Atton 2016). As studies of alternative media have long acknowledged, many sites define their identity in opposition to the mainstream media by, for example, their ownership structures or editorial missions (Atton 2015; Downing 2001). Nearly two decades ago, Curran and Couldry (2003) identified characteristics associated with being ‘alternative’, such as having normative goals that are distinct from corporate mainstream media or unique news gathering practices. What is alternative, in other words, is relational, and defined normatively and empirically from the ‘mainstream’.

This article enters into debates about the role and character of alternative media by examining new left-wing sites in the UK – The Canary and Evolve Politics, labelled alt-left media (Waterson 2017) – which explicitly define themselves *in opposition to mainstream media*. So, for example, The Canary’s website points out that “a handful of powerful moguls control our mainstream media. As such, its coverage is largely conservative. But we have created a truly independent and viable alternative”. On its website, Evolve Politics promises to be distinctive because it “will always be truly independent, meaning, unlike the mainstream media, we will never change, censor, or spike a story because of shareholders or a billionaire-owner’s vested interests”. While other online media adopt a left-wing position in political reporting, such as the Huffington Post, they have not been included in this study because of their corporate ownership structure. The focus was on alternative media which *self-identify* as being distinctive from mainstream media. The Canary and Evolve Politics were selected because they are two of the most high-profile sites producing regular news articles and had some of the most shared news stories online in the run up to the 2017 election campaign when alternative left media became a prominent part of the campaign (McDowell-Naylor 2018).

The article draws on a content analysis study of new alternative left media in the UK, examining 1284 articles and 3812 sources over a five-year period (since they were both

launched). It systematically tracks the editorial agenda of each site, the actors drawn upon to inform coverage as well as quantitatively assessing their opposition to mainstream media, including which outlets attract most attention and the focus of their stories. By way of conclusion, the ideological implications of how alt-left media portray mainstream media are considered, assessing their wider impact on media systems and, in the UK, how their opposition to the BBC may influence the future status of the UK's main public service broadcaster. But it is important to first put into context debates about how scholars have classified alternative media in today's fluid and complex digital media environment, and to then consider the ideological role of news media and public service broadcasters.

How are alternative media classified and their opposition to mainstream media understood?

How scholars classify alternative media outlets has been a long-standing academic debate. Historically, alternative media were viewed in a relatively uniform way. Their output was viewed as a product of business or political elite interests. By contrast, alternative media were perceived as being in binary opposition to mainstream media. This was often connected to left-wing politics championing social causes, while opposing right-wing policies. In doing so, alternative media were viewed as being more transparent and accountable than mainstream media, a democratic platform that reflected 'the public interest'. The reality, of course, was much more complex. Academic debates about alternative and mainstream media have become more sophisticated, acknowledging the editorial overlap in their practices and normative aims. As Holt et al (2020) pointed out, the conceptualisation of alternative media has become more nuanced in two ways. First, scholars now identify alternative media as a continuum between what is alternative and mainstream news. Second, scholars have become more critical of alternative media, including understanding the limitations of their output due to a variety of factors - organisational, financial, technological, professional - and relatively narrow audience base. Into the 21st century, academic debates about how alternative media are identified or classified have intensified, with typologies developed about whether particular outlets meet certain characteristics associated with being 'alternative'.

As the media landscape has become more crowded and competitive, distinguishing between what is 'alternative' and 'mainstream' media has become more complicated and nuanced. Holt et al (2019) have offered the most recent intervention into conceptualising how alternative media should be classified. They argue that alternative media represents *all* media broadly defined in opposition to mainstream media. In their words:

Alternative news media position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media, as expressed in editorial agendas or statements and/or are perceived as such by their audiences or third-parties. This counter-hegemonic alternativeness can emerge on the macro-level of societal function, the meso-level of organizations and/or the micro-level of news content and producers" (Holt et al 2019: 860).

This represents a more inclusive definition of alternative media compared with previous generations, recognising the fluidity of contemporary media styles formats, and acknowledging the changing dynamics of new alternative platforms and boundaries that represent something distinctive from 'the mainstream'.

Following Holt et al (2019), the focus of this study is on alternative media that both self-identifies as being in opposition to mainstream media, and, importantly, has an editorial mission to deliver a more independent news service than legacy news providers. This

reinforces Holt et al's (2019: 862) definition of alternative media as representing "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". How alternative media provide an editorial 'corrective' to mainstream media is, of course, open to empirical inquiry. The purpose of this study is to provide an evidence-based assessment of how new alternative left-wing media have carried out this editorial mission within the UK's media system. It does by establishing which sources they rely on inform their readers about what is happening in the world and what topics they address in their daily news agendas.

The influence new alternative media have had on political debates has attracted attention over recent years in the UK. During the 2017 general election campaign, one study found the top political stories on alt-left media sites, such as Novara Media, Another Angry Voice, Evolve Politics and The Canary, were more widely shared on social media than established mainstream news outlets (McAlister 2017). The influence of sites such as The Canary, however, should not be overinflated. A Reuters (2019) survey of news consumption suggested few that while a small minority of audiences were aware of some alternative media sites, they were not used on a weekly basis. But their reach at *key moments* – during an election campaign, say, or during a controversial story – means some stories covered by alternative media can be shared more widely across Twitter and Facebook than many mainstream news outlets. They can also set the wider media agenda because some high-profile journalists on alternative media appear on broadcast programmes that reach millions of people (Thomas and McDowell-Naylor 2019). Clips from broadcast media can also go viral on social media, creating an intermedia-agenda effect that far exceeds the reach of alternative media directly through their websites.

Nonetheless, new alternative left media produce a daily diet of news online and across their social media platforms. To date, however, there has only been one systematic content analysis study of new alternative left media in the UK, which examined The Canary over 10 days (Dodson 2018). It found, above all, that the site relied heavily on secondary sources from mainstream media platforms. This study will build on this research by systematically tracking the proportion of both The Canary's and Evolve Politics' dependence on mainstream media, as well as evaluate more closely the editorial nature of stories about legacy news organisations. While academics have explored the increasingly blurred boundaries between alternative and mainstream media, few studies have *empirically unpacked* the extent, type and nature of how alternative media critique mainstream news journalism. Examining 600 far right Norwegian alternative online media articles qualitatively, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) identified five ways these sites evaluated the performance of mainstream media and the authority they attempted to project. This included displaying knowledge about professional journalism, offering expert analysis, casting themselves as a victim of mainstream media, while positioning their editorial mission as representing 'ordinary people' and challenging how mainstream media understand the world. As the digital media landscape expands, they justified their study by concluding "it is necessary to unpack the variety and impact of far-right alternative media that compete for authority in high-choice media environments, and to critically scrutinize how amateur and semi-professional actors of the far-right talk about their own role as news providers and the quality of the content they produce" (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019: 1233).

This study takes up this challenge by way of a study of two new alternative left media sites in the UK by examining their routine coverage and degree of criticism towards mainstream media. Before we introduce our study, we consider the ideological role the news media play in society, with a focus on public service broadcasters within national media systems.

The ideological role of news media and public service broadcasting

Since most people rely on the news media to understand what is happening in the world, the information and analysis journalists routinely supply to the public helps set a framework of knowledge and understanding. In doing so, they police the ideological parameters of issues, voices and debates that are most widely heard in society. There is a voluminous literature in journalism studies that has theorised and documented the ideological impact of news media. Broadly speaking, they show how it is often powerful people – not ordinary citizens - and large organisations that police the boundaries of debate. As Gans (1979: 61) put it in the classic book, *Deciding What's News*: “when all other things are equal, the news pays most attention to and upholds the actions of elite individuals and elite institutions.” The news media, in this sense, do not offer a window on the world as they sometimes claim. They provide a highly selective prism through which the world is constructed. This was well articulated by Hall (1986): “The media have the power to represent the world in certain ways. And because there are so many different and conflicting ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed it matters profoundly what and who gets left out and how things, people, events and relationships are represented”. It is journalists, after all, who decide what is and is not newsworthy. As new alternative media gained more influence in recent years, this study identifies how they make sense of the world by examining the voices and topics that routinely inform their coverage. Do new alternative left media sites, for example, draw on a wider range of actors and reflect a more diverse editorial agenda than mainstream news media?

Given the ideological power of media, Anderson (1983) argued they help ‘imagine’ communities and nations. In the daily diet of text and images the public encounter, the ways the media generalize and address people as citizens reinforces their sense of inclusion and exclusion about culture, society and politics. Public service broadcasters have historically been connected to debates about defining ‘the nation’ (Scannell 1992). From radio to television, public service broadcasters were often either the exclusive means or the dominant source of information for people to become informed, educated or entertained by the media. They play what might be described as paternalistic role in society and have become a symbol of the nation because of their ideological power. Part of the paternal relationship public service broadcasters have with the public is shaped by their mission to remain impartial in politics and public affairs. But when it is perceived public service broadcasters take ‘sides’ on an issue or debate, it can result in a sense of public portrayal by citizens. Famously, for example, during the 1926 General Strike the BBC was accused of taking the government’s side in its broadcasting. Decades on, the impartiality of the BBC has been subject to sustained scrutiny in its political coverage. Freedman (2019: 213), for example, argued that the BBC cannot “remain meaningfully independent either of the governments who surround it or of the establishment from which it draws in senior personnel and its ‘conventional wisdom.’” This is a longstanding critique. A former head of BBC News in the 1990s, for instance, observed that the “BBC journalism is magnificent in its range, carefulness, and resources, but it does tend towards an establishment view of the world” (Hargreaves 2003: 27). However, systematic comparative research has shown that BBC news output is broadly similar to other UK broadcasters in terms of the sources used in reporting and the agenda it covers (Ofcom 2019a). In other words, there are legitimate concerns about the ideological role of news produced by public service broadcasters, but much criticism could also be directed at broadcasters or journalism more generally.

The characteristics of public service broadcasters are shaped by national media systems. They can differ considerably between nation states (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In

the US, for example, public service broadcasting is not well funded and commercial media have long dominated the news landscape. There was also a loosening of the US regulatory system policing the ideological boundaries of broadcast news in the 1980s. Over time, partisan news media grew in size and popularity, with audience studies showing many people in America turning to news ideologically consistent with their views (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). The UK's media system has a unique set of characteristics. In the supply of news, it has long been dominated by the BBC (Ofcom 2019a). But there are also three widely watched commercial public service broadcasters, which have licence agreements to deliver impartial and accurate news at peak time schedules. The UK national press has also been widely seen as an influential agenda setter in politics (Cushion et al 2018), which has been maintained in the digital age by its online and social media reach. But, as the 2019 Reuters news consumption survey revealed, it is highly partisan, right-wing newspapers – The Sun, Times, Daily Mail, Telegraph, Express and their Sunday equivalents – that dominate the supply of digital news (Newman et al 2020).

Given the continued digital dominance of the right-wing press and an influential public service broadcaster that is perceived to be conforming to the ideological views of state power, this media environment has arguably contributed to the continuation of and prominence of newly launched alt-left media in the UK (Harcup 2013). More simply put, the growth in alternative left media in the UK reflects a response to a mainstream media system that is viewed as serving a right-wing ideological agenda.

Overall, the study asks the following research questions: What topics and sources inform new alternative left media coverage between 2015 and 2019? To what extent is critiquing mainstream media a routine part of reporting? And which mainstream media outlets are the primary focus of attention?

Method and sample

This study examined articles on the websites of The Canary and Evolve Politics between 2015-2019. It analysed all content that appeared in the main pages of each site over the sample periods (with analysis of Evolve Politics beginning in 2016 when it was launched, compared to 2015 for Canary). This included three-week sample periods in 2015 (October 6 to 24), 2016 (9 to 29 October), 2018 (8 to 28 October) and 2019 (7 to 27 October). The sample consisted of three-week periods of time in October because this typically represents a busy time in UK politics when Parliament is in session. In 2017 the sample was between 30 April and 7 June – a five-week period of time – in order to include news about the general election campaign given the significance it had, as previously discussed, to each website's profiles. While The Canary and Evolve Politics were selected for this study because they are influential new alternative left media sites, they do not operate in the same way. Evolve Politics exclusively focusses on politics, for instance, whereas The Canary is a more general news site. The findings of the content analysis should be interpreted in this light.

In total, 1284 articles were generated over the five-year longitudinal study. The level of Canary output (1178 articles) was far higher than Evolve Politics (106 articles), with the sample in the election year generating far more items than other years. The larger sample in 2017 was not just because the campaign was highly newsworthy, but because five not three weeks of content was analysed. In addition to analysing all articles, the study also looked systematically at all sources, which included 2417 direct quotations and 1395 embedded tweets. Once again, The Canary made up the vast majority of sources (2255) and tweets (1320) compared to Evolve Politics (162 and 75 respectively). Although the study compares coverage between the two sites – with a focus on *the proportion* of articles and sources used

overall – the findings should be viewed in the context of The Canary producing far more articles than Evolve Politics over the five years of analysis. This also reflects the varying levels of resources across different new alternative left media sites.

The content analysis systematically examined both the volume and nature of coverage over time. This included the story subject of each article (e.g. politics, health, social affairs etc.) which assessed whether the item was primarily relevant to the UK or an international topic, as well as being principally about politics or another issue. The study then examined all politics articles in more detail by assessing the nature of the story (about Labour, Conservative or another specific party) and any sources that were directly quoted in coverage. As part of the analysis, the source of every embedded tweet was quantified and whether a video clip was featured in an item. This included assessing whether the embedded video clip was from mainstream media (e.g. BBC, ITV etc.) or amateur footage (e.g. citizens using mobile phones). In doing so, the content analysis can reveal the extent to which alternative left media were dependent on mainstream media content.

All variables were subject to an intercoder reliability test. As Tables 6 and 7 demonstrate, all variables achieved a high level of agreement with approximately 10% of the sample recoded to ensure a robust level of intercoder reliability.

What's the agenda of left-leaning alternative media?

While Evolve Politics was consistently focused on UK politics over the sample period, The Canary covered a broader range of topics. With the exception of 2017 (when both sites were almost exclusively focussed on the general election campaign), between approximately a fifth and close to a half of all Canary articles were about non-UK politics topics. In all non-UK politics articles, foreign affairs made up the largest category of news on both The Canary and Evolve Politics. It represented over a fifth of The Canary's non-UK politics news – 21.5% - over the five-year sample period, with over half of all articles – 51.2% - in 2018. This editorial focus was reinforced by the emphasis on items about war, terror or conflict, which were also consistently present in The Canary, representing (excluding 2017) between 7.9% and 22.6% of all non-UK stories between 2015 and 2019. The Canary also focused on issues not ordinarily given much prominence in mainstream media, such as news about animal welfare and the environment. Given Evolve Politics covered just eight non-UK politics stories over four years, it is hard to draw any clear conclusions, particularly since they covered a range of topics in this category. Overall, while The Canary's agenda covered a wide range of topics beyond UK politics – including issues not widely addressed by mainstream media outlets – Evolve Politics was almost exclusively focussed on UK politics. The agenda of new left-leaning alternative media, in other words, cannot be homogeneously interpreted in terms of the volume and nature of everyday content.

In order to explore the character of alternative media more closely, all UK politics stories were re-examined and categorised accordingly. Of course, articles were not mutually exclusive (for example, containing critical and supportive coverage of different parties). But the analysis focussed on the *predominant* theme and political tone of each article. Table 1 shows the comparative emphasis of UK political stories on The Canary and Evolve Politics between 2015 and 2019.

Insert Table 1

Above all, criticism of the Conservatives – the centre-right wing party in the UK – was the dominant theme of coverage in both left-wing sites. This was especially the case for The

Canary, where it made up between 46.6% and 71.4% of all its articles over the five-year sample period. There was some criticism of Labour - the major UK left-wing party – which both sites endorsed during the 2017 election campaign, but this was often about previous leaders and their more ideologically centrist policies. Both sites featured supportive items about Labour most prominently during the election campaign, making up 17.2% and 29.6% of articles in The Canary and Evolve Politics in 2017 respectively. In interpreting the nature of coverage, we found a small but significant number of articles that contained some form of humour in the Canary. They were classified in a separate category because they were distinctive from other articles, with content that could have included supportive and critical coverage of different parties, and tongue-in-cheek commentary.

Beyond criticism towards the Conservatives, the next most consistently prominent theme of articles on both sites was stories primarily focussed on *critiquing mainstream news media*, notably – as explored below – the BBC. In 2015 this made up 5.7% of articles for The Canary, but in 2016 this rose to 19.8%, 15.4% during the 2017 election campaign, 21.3% in 2018 but dropped to 6.9% in 2019. For Evolve Politics the proportion of stories about the media grew from 11.1% in 2016 to 20.4% in 2017 and 17.4% in 2018. There were very few Evolve articles in 2019, but one of the four articles on this topic was about critiquing the news media.

Which sources inform left-wing alternative media?

In order to further explore the editorial agenda and character of The Canary and Evolve Politics, all external sources directly quoted in articles between 2015 and 2019 were quantified. The Canary consistently featured an external source in almost eight in ten articles published (ranging from 77.9% to 90.2% between 2015 and 2019). The sourcing pattern of Evolve Politics, by contrast, was more varied, ranging from 67.9% of articles featuring a direct quotation to 91.3% over the five-year sample period.

The study then examined which sources informed both sites' articles. This was categorised as party political sources, members of the public and other types of sources, such as pollsters and pressure groups.

Insert Tables 2 and 3

As Table 2 shows, it was other types of sources that most regularly featured on The Canary (between 47.7% and 68.2% over the sample period). On Evolve Politics, the proportion of party political and other types of sources was more evenly split in 2016 (47.1% vs 44.1%) and 2017 (47.1% vs. 43.1%) respectively. This is distinctive from mainstream media coverage of politics which tends to focus on politicians and political parties more prominently (Cushion 2018). However, in the election year and 2019 UK parties made up between 66.2% and 83.5% of all sources on Evolve Politics. On both sites, citizens were not prominent actors in coverage, making up between 3.3% and 8.8% of all sources on The Canary and 4.2% and 9.8% on Evolve Politics.

Of the sources that were not affiliated with a political party or a member of the public, Table 3 shows that there were a wide range of actors used to inform coverage across both sites. However, the most consistently used source was journalists or media figures from external organisations. On The Canary, they made up 33.8% of all sources in 2015, 29.9% in 2016, 45.1% in 2017, 33.1% in 2018 and 21.9% in 2019. On Evolve Politics, by contrast, the share of other types of sources was 13.2% in 2016, 33.2% in 2017, 22.7% in 2018 and no journalist or media figures from external organisations in 2019.

To further explore the nature of alternative media content, we examined all sources that appeared in embedded tweets over the sample period. Both alternative media sites have increasingly relied on sources from Twitter to inform their content. So, for example, in The Canary a tweet appeared in 12.9% of items in 2015, but then 30.5% in 2016, 45.8% in 2017, 58.6% in 2018 and 54.9% in 2019. Similarly, in 2016 and 2017 16.7% and 17.0% of articles in Evolve Politics, but in 2018 and 2019 this rose to 65.2% and 75%.

Table 4 shows the proportion of embedded tweets that featured sources from political parties, members of the public or other actors between 2015 and 2019.

Insert Tables 4 and 5

Above all, both websites draw heavily on members of the public on Twitter. On Canary, citizens made up 41.2% of all sourced tweets in 2015, 53% in 2015, 31.5% in 2017, 32.6% in 2018 and 44.9% in 2019. Evolve Politics, by contrast, sourced members of the public in just 11.1% in 2016, but this rose to 38.5% in 2017, 61.4% in 2018 and 44.4% in 2019. Every other type of source except party political sources and citizens also made up a considerable share of tweets. For the Canary in 2015 and 2017, for example, other sources made up 41.4% and 55.6%, while for Evolve Politics they made up 55.6% and 46.2% in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Once again, when the type of other source category was broken down (see Table 5) it reveals that, in most years of the sample period, journalists by far make up the largest actor which appeared on both alternative media sites. In 2016 and 2017, for example, 54% and 53.6% of Canary other actor tweets were journalists, while in Evolve Politics they made up 80% in 2016, 75% in 2018 and 100% in 2019.

The analysis of sources finally examined the proportion of items that included a video clip with images and/or audio and, importantly, its source, such as from professional media like the BBC or amateur footage from a political activist's phone. There was an uneven use of embedding videos in stories on both sites over the five-year sample period. On The Canary, videos featured in 7.5% of all articles in 2015, 12.4% in 2016, 44.5% in 2017, 26.5% in 2018 and 3.6% in 2019, whereas in Evolve they were included in 4.2% of articles in 2016, 18.2% in 2017, 21.7% in 2018 and none in 2019. In most years the vast majority of items only included one video. But interestingly in 2017 – the election year – 55.6% of Canary items had three or more videos, suggesting they intensified their coverage during the campaign.

Overall, between 70.7% and 100% of Canary videos and 64.3% and 100% of Evolve Politics videos were from professional news outlets, demonstrating the huge reliance new alternative left media have on mainstream media in their articles. When broken down by which professional embedded videos were most drawn upon on both The Canary and Evolve Politics, the BBC stood out as the dominant source in every year. In 2017, for example, The Canary featured 115 videos, which represented 44.7% of all its embedded sources that year. Evolve Politics in 2018 featured 17 BBC videos, which made up 32.1% of all its embedded sources.

Which mainstream news media outlets do alternative media critique?

In order to further explore the stories primarily focussed on criticising mainstream media (Canary N = 140 and Evolve Politics N = 18), the study re-examined all these items in more quantitative and qualitative depth. Our unit of analysis changed from assessing the whole article to examining every instance of when the mainstream media was critiqued, along with the topic, as well as the object of criticism, which included the news outlet and individual journalist. So, for example, if it is stated 'the BBC and ITV are biased broadcasters' we

coded this as two instances of criticism against the BBC and ITV. In total, this generated 326 instances of media criticism (301 in The Canary and 25 in Evolve Politics).

Overall, the study found the vast majority of media criticism was directed at specific outlets and journalists rather than about the mainstream media generally. So, for example, instances of criticism towards specific news media made up between 73.3% and 92.9% in The Canary. On Evolve Politics – where the sample size was much smaller – 83.3% to 100% of media criticism instances were about specific outlets between 2016 and 2018, whereas in 2019 all of them were about critiquing the mainstream media generally. In most years the BBC made up the largest proportion of criticism. On The Canary, for example, the BBC reflected 18.2%, 29.5%, 21.7% and 37.5% of all instance criticism towards mainstream media. Other broadcasters were occasionally criticised, but not to the same degree. UK national press were also subject to considerable criticism, in particular more right-wing newspapers. In 2017, for example, The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Sun, Daily Star, The Express and The Times, made up, between them, 52.7% of all instances of criticism towards the media. In Evolve Politics, by contrast, The Daily Mail was singled out for its coverage, whereas the BBC represented 71.4% of all instances of media criticism in 2017. In the election year, an even more dramatic focus on the BBC emerged when the outlet of individual journalists criticised was isolated. In 2017 BBC journalists made up 65.7% and 57.1% of all criticism on The Canary and Evolve Politics respectively.

In order to explore coverage in more detail, a more qualitative assessment of every article that at some form of critique mainstream was examined as part of a separate study (Cushion 2021). This involved a more iterative process than quantifying themes in a content analysis by identifying how alternative media sites legitimised their criticism of professional journalism. All 158 stories were read several times, with reoccurring themes isolated and judgements about the editorial characteristics identified. For example, the construction of headlines, the selection of sources, and the nature and style of writing, structure and format.

Six overlapping themes were identified. First, alternative media alleged political media bias. This was evidenced by the analysis of journalistic language, broadcast editing, visual imagery, as well as interpretations of hard evidence, such as opinion poll data. For example, one Canary headline read: “One shocking Newsnight clip explains why the BBC is seen as a mouthpiece for the Tories” (21 October 2019). It highlighted selective use of imagery that suggested Conservative MPs were being abused on social media when, in fact, left-wing Labour MPs were too. Second, criticism of alternative media was often conveyed by professional journalists or left-wing political figures. In effect, criticism was then outsourced to more established and authoritative sources than alternative media websites. Third, official bodies or academics were regularly sourced about their observations and studies about the inadequacies of mainstream media and professional journalists. Fourth, rather than isolating specific examples of sloppy journalism or media bias, the conventions, practices and values of mainstream media were drawn upon to highlight systemic problems with mainstream media. For instance, A Canary item headlined “After last night, the BBC’s impartiality guidelines aren’t worth the paper they’re written on” (9 October, 2018) focussed on the regulatory routines of the public service broadcasters, and how this undermined coverage of impartially reporting climate change. Fifth, there was relentless, constant surveillance of mainstream media, prominently pointing out factual errors even after they had been removed. Sixth, the critique of mainstream media often centred on questions of media power and ownership. On both The Canary and Evolve Politics, for instance, Rupert Murdoch was namechecked with his editorial influence highlighted.

Taken together, this qualitative study of new alternative left media showed the nuanced way sites often legitimised their opposition to mainstream media. This was supported by selective quotes, video clips and expert sources. But mainstream media bias was

often uncovered by what was excluded from news coverage rather than what was covered, with alternative ways of reporting recommended by The Canary and Evolve Politics. Overall, it was argued that this legitimatising strategy echoed long established conventions used in professional journalism (Cushion 2021). In so doing, alternative media were legitimatising their own journalism by delegitimising mainstream media.

Interpreting the editorial agenda of new alternative left media and the implications of their opposition to mainstream news

This study brought new alternative left media into sharper focus by systematically examining coverage in The Canary and Evolve Politics between 2015-2019. Analysing 1284 articles and 3812 sources, the study found The Canary's agenda was made up of a relatively high proportion of news about international affairs, whereas Evolve Politics was more UK-centric. Both sites included stories not ordinarily covered by mainstream media, such as coverage of animal welfare. News about UK politics – driven by the voices of politicians and reaction from sources, including the public, in embedded tweets – with a focus on criticising the government's right-wing policy agenda was central to both their agendas. The study also revealed a prominent theme centred on critiquing mainstream media, in particular BBC news. Many stories, for example, focussed exclusively on perceived media bias against Labour and political reporting that was interpreted as reinforcing the views of the establishment. This finding reinforced long-standing observations about the reliance on mainstream media for alternative media content (Harcup 2013). It also echoes recent empirical studies of alternative media which found a focus on criticism of mainstream media reporting (Dodson 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019).

While alternative media have historically viewed themselves in opposition to conventional thinking (Atton 2015; Curran and 2003), this study revealed new alternative left media in the UK have continued this tradition, making criticism of mainstream news central to their routine agenda. As their websites clearly state, new left-wing media in the UK position themselves in a response to the national media system, which is viewed by these sites as serving right-wing political elite agendas. This longitudinal study demonstrated just how central exposing the ideological consequences of mainstream news was to their agendas. The BBC, by far, was the object of most criticism, especially in the run up to the 2017 general election. During the campaign, for example, journalists were singled out for criticism in 65.7% and 57.1% of all critiques aimed at reporters on The Canary and Evolve Politics respectively.

How can we interpret the implications of alternative media criticism of mainstream media? The focus of this study has been on the *content* on alternative media rather than measuring the wider impact of their output. However, the ideological consequences of their criticism towards mainstream media, most strikingly the UK's main public service broadcaster, are important to consider.

The BBC, of course, has long been criticised by UK newspapers for a perceived left-wing bias. But more vocal criticism from new alternative left media sites may be influencing people's view from a different ideological perspective. While trust towards mainstream media is generally down in the UK, a longitudinal survey revealed trust in the BBC fell by a fifth between 2018 and 2020 among people with either left-wing or right-wing views about politics (Newman et al 2020). Given alternative media audiences broadly hold strong ideological perspectives about the world (Kalogeropoulos and Newman 2018), being regularly exposed to critical coverage about the BBC's journalism and mainstream media more generally could be fostering negative attitudes towards professional journalism. At the

same time, the BBC remains, by far, the most trusted source of news for people in the UK (Newman et al 2020).

There are legitimate reasons for why the UK's main public service broadcaster is singled out by left-wing alternative media sites. As previously acknowledged, public service broadcasters play an important role in society, setting the ideological parameters of debate. But they have tended to be institutionally tied to the state, which tend – it is argued – to reflect establishment views rather than ideologically diverse perspectives (Freedman 2018). Alternative media criticism of public service broadcasters, in this sense, is understandable. Academic studies have shown BBC journalism has not always covered politics and public affairs impartially, but nor have other UK broadcasters (Cushion and Thomas 2017; Cushion et al 2018). Indeed, the UK's newspaper's market, in particular, has long been ranked as the least trusted media source. In the run up to the 2019 election, for example, UK newspapers were far more imbalanced than in the previous 2017 campaign, favouring more right-wing Conservative perspectives than left-wing Labour sources (Loughborough University, 2019). While singling out the BBC is an understandable editorial motivation of alternative media, the collective impact they may be having on public service broadcasting and professional journalism more generally should be subject to further study. After all, a recent Ofcom (2019b) review of the BBC's range and depth of news demonstrated that the UK's main public service broadcaster provided a distinctive service compared to other news outlets, reporting a greater range of politics and international affairs, and providing analytically rich and informative journalism. Put another way, if the BBC was not part of the UK's news landscape the ideological range and analytical depth of stories and perspectives, such as shining a spotlight on international issues or explaining political issues to audiences, would diminish. If public trust and support was to decline for the BBC, its ability to command widespread support for its licence fee funding would also fall. After all, the alternative media coverage examined in this study was not focussed on reforming the BBC; the content was largely critical coverage of mainstream media reporting rather than alternative ways a public service broadcasting system could be reimagined. More research with editors of alternative media is needed to understand why they regularly draw critical attention to BBC news above broadcasters they be equally or even more guilty of breaching rules about impartiality, or producing sloppy or poor quality journalism.

While scholars have long observed that alternative media regularly attack the mainstream media (Harcup 2013), this study builds on this work by empirically demonstrating the degree and nature of this editorial in new alternative left media. It highlighted the importance of measuring how media criticism informs the agendas of alternative media and, importantly, considering the ideological effect on the wider media system. In understanding alternative right-wing media, Holt (2019: 33) drew on the term "Ideological anti-systemness", which referred, in his words, "to the degree of hostility and distrust displayed by the specific alternative media towards mainstream media and their institutions within the established media system of a nation." This study's longitudinal analysis of alternative left media criticism towards the mainstream media generally, specific outlets and, in particular, the BBC, empirically measured the nature of hostility and distrust. It demonstrated the range of news outlets and individual journalists under fire, with the UK's main public service broadcaster the biggest casualty.

But more national and comparative research is needed to not just reveal the extent and nature of alternative media criticism towards mainstream media. There also needs to be a greater understanding of why new alternative media have been launched, and how they are shaping public debate and policy discussions about specific news organisations as well as different types of media systems cross-nationally. Future studies should pay more theoretical and empirical attention to the systemic impact of alternative media on national media

systems. After all, mainstream media are under attack internationally, with a growing army of alternative media – from both right- and left-wing perspectives – undermining their credibility. While, on one level, more debate and scrutiny of mainstream news practices are a welcomed development in public discourse, and could lead to more accountable journalism by enhancing the media literacy of audiences. On another level, by focussing almost exclusively on criticism of particular media institutions or outlets – whether merited or not – it could lead to *all* news being devalued within a media system. In order to better understand the impact of alternative media, journalism scholars should pay more attention to theorising how they comparatively report mainstream media and empirically test how their coverage informs public debate.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Andy Nelmes and Dr Marina Morani for coding the content analysis data.

Funding

The research is funded by the British Academy small grants scheme (Award SRG1819\190453). The title of the grant award is ‘Accurate or misleading? The portrayal of MSM in alt-left media’.

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Intercoder reliability test

The study was carried out in three stages with different coders. In each study there was a lead researcher who examined the majority of content, but a second coder was used to carry out the intercoder reliability test. The first study examined The Canary between 2015-2018 (see Table 7) while the second study assessed Evolve Politics between 2016-2019 and Canary in 2019. The third study examined all articles that featured media criticism (see Table 8). In all studies approximately 10% of the sample was recoded and subject to an intercoder reliability test. As both tables demonstrate, all variables had a high level of reliability.

Insert Tables 6 and 7

Table 1: The proportion of articles in The Canary and Evolve Politics about Political Coverage (N in brackets)

Subject	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Canary	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	
Supportive of Conservatives	/	/	/	/	9.3% (5)	/	/	/	/	
Supportive of Labour	10% (7)	1.5% (2)	11.1% (2)	17.2% (74)	29.6% (16)	2.3% (4)	4.3% (1)	13.7% (14)	/	
Supportive of Greens	/	/	/	/	/	0.6% (1)	/	/	/	
Critical of Conservatives	71.4% (50)	46.6% (61)	44.4% (8)	48.5% (208)	16.7% (9)	50.6% (88)	60.9% (14)	63.7% (65)	/	
Critical of Labour	4.3% (3)	4.9% (6)	16.7% (3)	3% (13)	3.7% (2)	4.6% (8)	8.7% (2)	/	/	
Critical of Lib Dems	/	/	/	0.5% (2)	/	/	/	5.9% (6)	25% (1)	
Critical of UKIP/Far right	/	0.8% (1)	/	0.7% (3)	/	1.1% (2)	/	2% (2)	25% (1)	
Comparisons of Labour/Conservative parties	/	/	11.1% (2)	2.6% (11)	11.1% (6)	/	8.7% (2)	1% (1)	/	
Humour	1.4% (1)	17.6% (23)	/	3% (13)	1.9% (1)	10.9% (19)	/	/	/	
Media criticism	5.7% (4)	19.8% (26)	11.1% (2)	15.4% (66)	20.4% (11)	21.3% (37)	17.4% (4)	6.9% (7)	25% (1)	
Other	7.1% (5)	9.2% (12)	5.6% (1)	9.1% (39)	7.4% (4)	8.6% (15)	/	6.9% (7)	25% (1)	
Total	100% (70)	100% (131)	100% (18)	100% (429)	100% (54)	100% (174)	100% (23)	100% (102)	100% (4)	

Table 2: Percentage of different types of sources informing The Canary and Evolve Politics articles between 2015 and 2019 (N in brackets)

Direct quote	2015	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Canary	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve
Party sources	30.5% (64)	29.1% (81)	47.1% (16)	38.6% (397)	66.2% (47)	29.2% (146)	47.1% (24)	49% (117)	83.3% (5)
Citizens	6.2% (13)	4.7% (13)	8.8% (3)	4.3% (44)	4.2% (3)	2.6% (13)	9.8% (5)	3.3% (8)	/
Other sources	63.3% (133)	66.2% (184)	44.1% (15)	57.1% (587)	29.6% (21)	68.2% (341)	43.1% (22)	47.7% (114)	16.6% (1)
Total	100% (210)	100% (278)	100% (34)	100% (1028)	100% (71)	100% (500)	100% (51)	100% (239)	100% (6)

Table 3: Proportion of non-party political or citizen sources informing The Canary and Evolve Politics articles between 2015 and 2019 (N in brackets)

Category	2015	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Canary	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve
Expert/pollster	2.3% (3)	/	13.3% (2)	0.2% (1)	4.8% (1)	0.3% (1)	/	/	/
Business	4.5% (6)	6.5% (12)	/	2.7% (16)	/	3.5% (12)	/	7.0% (8)	100% (1)
Think tank	2.3% (3)	4.3% (8)	/	2.7% (16)	9.5% (2)	2.3% (8)	4.5% (1)	3.5% (4)	/
Academic	6.8% (9)	6.5% (12)	/	4.9% (29)	9.5% (2)	3.5% (12)	9.1% (2)	1.8% (2)	/
Economist	1.5% (2)	1.1% (2)	/	1.2% (7)	/	1.5% (5)	/	0.9% (1)	/
Journalist or media figure	33.8% (45)	29.9% (55)	13.3% (2)	45.1% (265)	33.3% (7)	33.1% (113)	22.7% (5)	21.9% (25)	/
Charity	9.8% (13)	7.1% (13)	6.7% (1)	6.0% (35)	/	7.0% (24)	4.5% (1)	/	/
Doctor/medical figure	0.8% (1)	4.9% (9)	6.7% (1)	5.3% (31)	/	0.6% (2)	4.5% (1)	4.4% (5)	/
Legal	1.5% (2)	2.7% (5)	/	3.1% (18)	4.8% (1)	3.5% (12)	/	21.9% (25)	/
Celebrity	0.8% (1)	/	/	1.9% (11)	/	/	/	0.9% (1)	/
Pressure group/campaigner	8.3% (11)	8.7% (16)	6.7% (1)	9.0% (53)	4.8% (1)	17.6% (60)	18.2% (4)	15.8% (18)	/
Trade union	3.0% (4)	1.1% (2)	/	1.2% (7)	/	3.8% (13)	/	4.4% (5)	/
EU/foreign politician/official	3.8% (5)	4.9% (9)	6.7% (1)	2.4% (14)	9.5% (2)	6.2% (21)	/	/	/
Teacher/headteacher/education	1.5% (2)	0.5% (1)	/	1.4% (8)	/	1.2% (4)	4.5% (1)	/	/
Security expert	0.8% (1)	0.5% (1)	/	2.6% (15)	/	0.9% (3)	4.5% (1)	/	/
Police	6.0% (8)	1.1% (2)	/	2.9% (17)	19.0% (4)	0.3% (1)	/	1.8% (2)	/
UN	/	2.2% (4)	13.3% (2)	1.7% (10)	/	1.2% (4)	13.6% (3)	0.9% (1)	/
Whistleblower	0.8% (1)	/	/	1.5% (9)	/	0.3% (1)	/	/	/
Government department	6.0% (8)	10.3% (19)	13.3% (2)	1.4% (8)	/	9.4% (32)	9.1% (2)	4.4% (5)	/
Fighter/armed group	/	1.1% (2)	/	0.7% (4)	/	/	/	/	/

Novelist/author/artist/filmmaker	3.8% (5)	4.3% (8)	/	0.5% (3)	/	1.5% (5)	/	/	/
Independent regulatory body	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	4.4% (5)	/
Trade Association	/	/	13.3% (2)	/	/	/	/	/	/
Other	2.3% (3)	2.2% (4)	6.7% (1)	1.7% (10)	4.8% (1)	2.3% (8)	4.5% (1)	5.8% (7)	/
Total	100% (133)	100% (184)	100% (15)	100% (587)	100% (21)	100% (341)	100% (22)	100% (114)	100% (1)

Table 4: Percentage of different types of sources informing The Canary and Evolve Politics articles between 2015 and 2019 (N in brackets)

Tweet	2015	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Canary	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve
Party sources	17.2% (5)	9.7% (13)	33.3% (3)	9.9% (52)	15.4% (2)	18.1% (79)	11.4% (5)	28.3% (56)	33.3% (3)
Citizens	41.4% (12)	53% (71)	11.1% (1)	31.5% (165)	38.5% (5)	32.6% (142)	61.4% (27)	44.9% (89)	44.4% (4)
Other sources	41.4% (12)	37.3% (50)	55.6% (5)	58.5% (306)	46.2% (6)	49.3% (215)	27.3% (12)	26.8% (53)	22.2% (2)
Total	100% (29)	100% (134)	100% (9)	100% (523)	100% (13)	100% (436)	100% (44)	100% (198)	100% (9)

Table 5: Proportion of non-party political or citizen sources on Twitter informing The Canary and Evolve Politics articles between 2015 and 2019 (N in brackets)

Other - category	2015	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Canary	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve	Canary	Evolve
Expert/pollster	/	2.0% (1)	/	/	50.0% (3)	/	8.3% (1)	1.9% (1)	/
Think tank	8.3% (1)	6.0% (3)	/	1.0% (3)	/	0.9% (2)	/	/	/
Academic	8.3% (1)	/	/	1.6% (5)	/	1.9% (4)	/	3.8% (2)	/
Journalist or media figure	16.7% (2)	54.0% (27)	80.0% (4)	53.6% (164)	16.7% (1)	47.0% (101)	75.0% (9)	39.6% (21)	100.0% (2)
Charity	8.3% (1)	6.0% (3)	/	1.6% (5)	/	7.9% (17)	/	/	/
Doctor/medical figure/NHS	/	/	/	1.3% (4)	/	0.5% (1)	/	/	/
Celebrity	/	/	20.0% (1)	3.3% (10)	/	1.9% (4)	/	/	/
Pressure group/campaigner	50.0% (6)	24.0% (12)	/	27.5% (84)	33.3% (2)	28.8% (62)	16.7% (2)	28.3% (15)	/
Trade union	/	/	/	0.7% (2)	/	1.9% (4)	/	5.7% (3)	/
Novelist/author/artist/filmmaker	8.3% (1)	4.0% (2)	/	5.2% (16)	/	4.7% (10)	/	7.5% (4)	/
Police	/	/	/	2.3% (7)	/	/	/	/	/
Other	/	4.0% (2)	/	1.9% (6)	/	4.7% (10)	/	13.3% (7)	/
Total	100.0% (12)	100.0% (50)	100.0% (5)	100.0% (306)	100.0% (6)	100.0% (215)	100.0% (12)	100.0% (53)	100.0% (2)

Table 6: Intercoder reliability results for Study 1 and 2 (all variables apart from media criticism)

	Study 1		Study 2	
	Canary 2015-2018		Evolve Politics 2016-2019 and Canary 2019	
Variable	Level of Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha	Level of Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha
UK politics or non UK politics	100%	1	100%	1
News category	95%	0.942	100%	1
Specific Category	95%	0.941	100	1
Direct quotations	99%	0.98	90.9%	0.87
Embedded tweets	100%	1	100%	
Video sources	97.5%	0.898	100%	1

Table 7: Intercoder reliability results for study 3 (media criticism)

Variable	Level of agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Object of Criticism	92.3%	0.88
News Outlet Criticised	94.7%	0.94
Journalist Criticised Category	93.8%	0.90
Journalist Criticised Organisation	100%	1
Type of Criticisms	93.5%	0.89